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Translating Chopin's Parrot: Local Color Louisiana and the Limits of Literary Interpretation, 1865-1914

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Bill Hardwig, Major Professor

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Translating Chopin's Parrot: Local Color Louisiana and the Limits of Literary Interpretation, 1865-1914

A Dissertation Presented for the
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Degree
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Matthew Paul Smith
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. . . werden alle Bücher der Menschen, und ihre Reden, etwas unverständliches an sich haben.

(Chladenius, *Einleitung Zur Richtigen Auslegung Vernünftiger Reden und Schriften*; § 157)

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Ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus.

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the American Civil War, national periodicals such as *Harper's*, *The Century*, and *The Atlantic Monthly* eagerly solicited and published literature depicting small, often isolated regional communities within the United States – literature collectively referred to as local color. This project examines a tension that exists between two conflicting impulses that drove local color writing – one that sought to participate in an ethnographic project rooted in literary realism, the other that reveled in representing local spaces as sites of ambiguity, uncertainty, illegibility, and impenetrability. "Translating Chopin's Parrot" argues that literary historicists, drawn to the ethnographic elements of local color, often elide or fail to account for the tension that exists between these elements and those that, in accentuating indeterminacy and mystery, contest and complicate ethnography's empirical presuppositions. Unsurprisingly, this tension has led to interpretive conflicts over the most fruitful approach to reading local color literature. This project divides these conflicts into four categories – conflicts over definitions, translations, mappings, and misreadings of genre. It takes as a case study literature written about Creole and Cajun Louisiana during the heyday of local color (1865-1914) and articulates what a historicist framework can and cannot illuminate about texts by George Washington Cable, Charles Gayarré, Lafcadio Hearn, Kate Chopin, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. In doing so, it makes the larger argument that, rather than occupying a quaint and idiosyncratic niche within nineteenth-century American literature, local color grapples with significant epistemological, aesthetic, and hermeneutic questions.

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Madame Lebrun's Parrot: Local Color Literature and Interpretive Limits

> A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over:
> "*Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!* That's all right!"
> He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence.
>
> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899)

On Grand Isle, birds interrupt Léonce Pontellier's morning perusal of the New Orleans newspaper. Nearby, the resort manager Madame Lebrun – the owner of the parrot and the mockingbird – shouts orders to her servants. Young girls play snatches of music from Ferdinand Hérold's opera *Zampa, ou La Fiancée du Marbre* on the piano. Soon we will encounter Léonce's wife, Edna Pontellier, and follow her as she negotiates the conflicts between the duties she owes her family and the duties she owes herself as a woman. We follow her as she, like so many of the cultural outsiders who populate American regional literature, attempts to navigate the unfamiliar attitudes and customs of her environs. We will follow her, ultimately, into the Gulf of Mexico, where she drowns even as she delights in recollections of her childhood in rural Kentucky, memories rich in sensory details. For a moment, though, I would like to pause at the beginning of the narrative and fixate on Madame Lebrun's parrot and its imitations. Initial publications do not footnote a translation of the parrot's line. We might imagine readers familiar with French would easily have made out *allez vous-en* (get out of here; go away), but *sapristi* presents a bit of a challenge for English-speaking readers. It substitutes new consonants for those of its etymological origin, *sacristi*, itself a shortening of the Latin *Sacrum Corpus Christi* – the sacred Body of Christ, the Host. Linguistically, then, *sapristi* is a corruption of a corruption. English footnotes included in later editions of *The Awakening* waffle in terms of its intensity as a swear word, with some translating it as softly as "for goodness sakes" and others braving into the

territory of "goddammit" (likely a bit of an overreach, given that the popular Belgian cartoon character Tintin blurts out the occasional *sapristi* as well). The parrot's blending of human speech swirls into incoherence, a confusion of contradictory messages – the tirade, the curse, the apology "That's all right." It prepares readers, or at least those who can translate the bird's message, for a novel of ambiguities and tensions.

In addition to French expletives, the parrot also knows Spanish and "a language which nobody understood" (521). Here I want to linger on these opening lines of *The Awakening* as a thematic preparation for what follows in the novel and in this dissertation. The words of Lebrun's parrot – the shouting to get out, the mild oath – presage domestic disorder and marital misunderstanding, but the threat of a more radical breakdown of interpretation itself lurks in the narrator's revelation that the parrot speaks a language unknown to the Lebruns or the Pontelliers. The inability to be understood, suggested by the parrot's lapse into incomprehensibilty, will dog Edna Pontellier up until her final moments in the Gulf of Mexico as she reflects on the failure to communicate her desires to her husband or her beloved Robert Lebrun: "He [Robert] did not understand. He would never understand. Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him – but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone" (655). Understanding and its keenly-felt absence bookend *The Awakening*. For non-Francophone readers without the benefit of footnotes, the opening *sapristi* of Madame Lebrun's parrot dramatically reinforces the struggle to interpret the unfamiliar when one lacks local context or linguistic knowledge. These bookends illuminate not only concerns about a lack of understanding on a cultural/linguistic level but also an anxiety about the limits of interpersonal understanding more broadly. In the essay "Local Color and *The Awakening*," published in 1970 in *The Southern Review*, Jack May argues that

> the novel is not simply about a woman's need for sexual satisfaction that her marriage cannot provide; sexuality in the novel represents a more universal human longing for freedom, and the frustration that Edna experiences is a poignant statement about the agony of human limitations. (1032)

May goes to on propose that though scholars often prefer to bypass the regionalist elements of Chopin's novel, these elements themselves amount to more than mere ornamental local touches. Rather, they give us insights into the novel's crucial thematic concerns about social, sexual, cultural, and hermeneutic limitations. Thus local color literature, far from utilizing regional dialects and customs as stylistic flourishes, engages with significant questions about interpretation and interpersonal understanding precisely *through* these local elements.

This dissertation stems from a curiosity about those elements of American local color literature that pose interpretive difficulty for readers unfamiliar with specific bodies of local knowledge. It pursues this curiosity by examining a particular body of this literature as a case study – local color literature depicting Creole and Cajun south Louisiana from the period following the end of the American Civil War to the outbreak of the First World War. This period, during which regional literature depicting various local cultures within the United States flourished, witnessed the literary rise of such Louisiana local colorists as George Washington Cable, Lafcadio Hearn, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and, of course, the Missouri transplant whose literary output became inseparably associated with the Pelican State, Kate Chopin. This project explores which portions of these texts resist interpretation or open up the possibilities of interpretive conflicts between readers, but its aim goes beyond merely offering a history of reader reception of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century regional writing that depicts Louisiana. Rather, it argues that by paying attention to the limit-points where interpretive dilemmas occur, we can illuminate a key facet of local color literature – its position within a space of tension between competing epistemological and aesthetic commitments, some rooted in

a project of literary realism and ethnography, others arising out of a romantic delight in *topophilia* and a reveling in subjective experience and mystery. This project argues that historicist approaches to local color only take us so far into these texts' treatment of the illegible, the ambiguous, and the mysterious. It suggests that, if we examine the limits of historicist readings of local color, we can gain a fuller appreciation of larger hermeneutic and epistemological issues that undergird the regionalist details in these texts. Madame Lebrun's parrot and its untranslated squawk serve as an avian overture and preparation for questions crucial to *The Awakening* as well as the inquiries that propel this project.

First, a note on terminology. This dissertation will most often use the term local color to mean a specific movement of regionalist writing in America that flourished in national periodical culture between 1865 and 1914. The term regionalism will be deployed more broadly to tag *any* literature or work of art that draws heavily on elements associated with a specific place. Local color as a term also holds a certain attraction for me insofar as its etymological roots place us in a more productive space of shared meanings – the local as *locus.* On the other hand, region harkens back to *regere,* to rule, and it connotes a utilitarian partition of space for the purposes of control and subjugation. When Caesar divides *omnia Gallia in partes tres,* he engages in creating regions in order to rule (*regere*) them and impose an imperial order upon them from the top down. I prefer *locus* for its connotations that suggest the idea of the local as a radically specific yet fluid space of encounter – admittedly with its limits, but perhaps not limits that are always inherently oppressive.

This dissertation examines local color written about Cajun and Creole south Louisiana from roughly the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the First World War. While I acknowledge the troubling and perhaps archaic move of periodizing literary history according to

the outbreaks and conclusions of warfare, in this particular case the energies that fuel local color literature (the reunification projects of Reconstruction) and the counter-energies that lead to its decline in popularity (the aesthetics of literary Modernism and justifiable post-World War I skepticism about loyalties to ethnic identities) roughly correspond to these major military events. The key texts under consideration here all fall within this time period: George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880) and *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* (1889); Charles Gayarré's *Fernando de Lemos* (1872); Lafcadio Hearn's "At the Gates of the Tropics" (1877) and *Chita* (1888); Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *The Goodness of St. Rocque* (1899); Felix Voorhies's *Acadian Reminiscences, with the True Story of Evangeline* (1907); and a brief coda with musings on Kate Chopin's "Beyond the Bayou" from *Bayou Folk* (1894). Occasionally antebellum material like the Creole poetry of *Les Cenelles* (1845) as well as regional literary output from after the First World War will appear, but the majority of my analysis focuses on works published within the chronological framework of the dissertation's title.

But why Louisiana? As the academic conversations in literary studies venture into global Souths and as the legacy of post-structuralism encourages us to imagine borders as fluid spaces, it may seem provincial or obtuse to choose such a limited area as a space for studying questions with applicability to all of local color literature. In the cosmopolitan twenty-first century, it may seem regressive to retreat behind state boundaries as the containers for academic inquiry, even as scholarship in the humanities stretches to imagine models of affiliation that cross boundaries of all kinds. I offer three broad responses to these relevant critiques and then put forward three specific justifications for the appropriateness of literary Louisiana as an imagined space for answering the research question posed by this project. What follows are the broader defenses for speaking of localized literature at all. First: The borders used to demarcate place mattered to

those who lived in them and wrote about them. Conceiving of a state as a distinct and particular *locus* mattered to the individuals inhabiting that state, and it continues to matter today. Regardless of how one can justifiably complicate the fluid borders between places and question arbitrary distinctions that make for the narcissism of small differences, the fact remains that places *qua* places have meaning. Philip Joseph argues as much in *American Literary Regionalism in a Global Age* (2007), noting that approaching spaces within traditionally-understood borders need not be seen as a mark of intellectual naïveté:

> A defining limit (perhaps based on a set of religious practices, political goals, educational aims, or environmental concerns) will always differentiate a community, but that border can easily be imagined in an adaptive form, one that allows for revised collective agreements and for the movement of people and ideas into and out of the community. (6)

Other scholars such as Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, whose magisterial *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (2003) represents a crucial text in the study of American literary regionalism, dispute this focus on material places, identifying one of the temptations of regionalism to be its "naturalizing illusion" that treats the borders of the regional community as more real than the borders of the arbitrary nation-state (6). Stephanie Foote has argued as well in an essay on local color and local knowledge that "there is no intrinsic connection between the genre of regional writing – or any literary representation of geographic places – and actual, material spaces" (295). I find such arguments fundamentally unconvincing insofar as they rely upon an almost gnostic approach, positing a radically dualist separation between the aesthetic, imagined representations of spaces and the material realities of the spaces themselves. We can use regional borders as frameworks for academic discussion without succumbing to a naïve faith in their givenness or naturalness. Regional writing is not merely about a generalized "idea of place itself" (Foote 295), but also about specific places, and an attention to the radical particularities of these places is crucial for studying local color literature.

Second: Throughout this dissertation, historical Louisiana blurs into Louisiana as a literary imaginary, a space defined by an ever-developing yet consistent cluster of tropes and iconography. Various overlapping Louisianas exist here, and I attempt to hold them all in balance with one another. Conceiving of literary Louisiana as a tradition – and, as a tradition, inherently connected to continuity – makes no specific demands that one approach the state as a static, discrete entity, but it does, for the sake of intelligibility, require that we utilize the word *Louisiana* as a way of organizing this set of literary and cultural tropes. Various scholarly books have taken for their projects the tracing of these tropes, including Violet Harrington Bryan's *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature* (1993), Richard S. Kennedy's two edited collections *Literary New Orleans: Essays and Meditations* (1992) and *Literary New Orleans in the Modern World* (1998), and Suzanne Disheroon-Green and Lisa Abney's edited collection *Songs of the Reconstructing South: Building Literary Louisiana, 1865-1945* (2002). When I use the term *Louisiana* in this project, it is not so much to assert – though I would have few qualms with this claim – that there could be such a thing as a "state" literature (eg. Missourian literature, Alaskan literature) but to refer to a space that exists, like all spaces, at the intersection of the material and the imagined. Perhaps of the fifty states, Louisiana occupies a privileged position insofar as American culture has repeatedly returned to it as a particularly vibrant space in which to explore issues of regional distinctiveness and local affiliation – from *Harper's* lavishly-illustrated articles about Cajun life on the Bayou Teche to History Channel's *Swamp People*, from George Washington Cable's *Old Creole Days* to HBO's *Treme.*

Third: The local matters. This is the most polemical of my three responses. Smallness and concreteness keep abstraction at bay. This is not to say that I am denying the multicultural and multinational networks that branch off from specific *loci*. In fact, this project will link Louisiana

to surprising networks of places – Basque enclaves in the Pyrenees, salons of Bourbon Restorationists in France, cells of second-century Egyptian hermits, Polynesian islands, the monument in Boston Common to Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, and offices of Quebeçois cultural societies. These cosmopolitan connections are important and recent scholarship revels in charting them, but I wish to hold an appreciation for these connections in balance with an appreciation for Louisiana as a particular *locus*, a space where shared meanings circulate in specific ways. In doing so I seek to address a broader imbalance in literary study that so often privileges the stance of the cosmopolitan to the stance of the local. To be clear, I do not intend to simply flip the hierarchy and sing unmitigated praise for a localist stance – a point my final chapter on the problems of local interpretations of local color will underscore. I simply intend to demonstrate that the local can be treated as an intellectually-significant object of study in its own right without reflexive recourse to mapping it into an international schema of relevance.

So much has been written, both for popular audiences and scholarly audiences, about the vaunted exoticness of Louisiana. Even academic researchers cannot help occasionally slipping into expressions of *topophilia* in their studies on the state. Along with this Louisianan exceptionalism, we also find questionable scholarly claims for the "authenticity " of New Orleans culture (see Kevin Fox Gotham's *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy*). Here I offer, instead of vague pronouncements about Louisiana's exoticism, three facets of Louisianan cultural history that make the state a fruitful venue for exploring hermeneutic difficulties in local color literature. These should not be taken as part of the aforementioned tradition of positing a Louisianan exceptionalism but rather as specific explanations as to why the cultural practices, linguistic peculiarities, racial categories, and

theological lexicon of the state provide us with a rich and unique archive of texts for exploring the hermeneutic aporias of local color literature. First: Two major Francophone cultures – Louisiana Creole French and Cajun French – flourished in the state well into the 1930s. The linguistic distinctiveness of these forms of French means that literary passages written in them pose interpretive difficulties for even speakers of the Standard French of the *Academie française*. Second: Starting as early as the colonial era, Louisiana has historically made use of idiosyncratic racial categorizations (compared to Anglophone North America) and deployed terms such as *creole* in racial and aracial ways that often baffled regional outsiders and caused disputes among Louisianans themselves. Third: In the Cajun and Creole parishes that make up the southern coast of the state (the area treated in this dissertation), Roman Catholicism traditionally served as the predominant religious and cultural force. Due to the influence of French Canadian Catholicism brought down from Nova Scotia by the Acadians (Cajuns) and the influence of Caribbean West African beliefs, Catholicism took on a variety of syncretic and folk forms with distinct terminology and practices at least partially illegible to outsiders. This is not to say that all three of these cultural elements (*francophonie*, ambiguous racial categories, and folk Catholicism) only existed in Louisiana but rather that their use as literary elements in local color fiction presented particular challenges to certain readerships – let us say, for instance, a middle-class white Protestant Boston reader of *Harper's Monthly* – who lacked the requisite local context to navigate through these elements and who required the local color author to interpret these elements for her.

Local Color and the Logic of Both/And

Before launching into a dissertation so tightly localized in its scope, it may be fruitful to consider similarities between American literary regionalism and regionalist aesthetic impulses in other parts of the world. A brief diversion into nineteenth-century French regionalism in the visual arts will lead us – via a bit of a circuitous route – back to the United States and the fascination that editors and readers of national periodicals had for regionalism as a literary mode. In doing so I intend to demonstrate how the impulses and anxieties that propelled the production of regional literature in the postbellum United States, including local color literature depicting Louisiana, had parallels across the Atlantic Ocean. Here we will find as well material that addresses key concerns of this project's analysis of local color – the limits of interpretation and the function of local color as an aesthetic space in which to dramatize the negotiation (within a demarcated *locus*) of conflicting models of epistemology and modes of living.

When pressed by art critics to account for ideological commitments that might have influenced his work, the nineteenth-century French painter Jean-François Millet consistently responded, "I am a peasant and nothing more than a peasant" (Boime 84). For all its apparent modesty, this reply misrepresented the realities of Millet's upbringing on his family's country estate in Normandy, where servants attended to the needs of the household and where young Jean-François himself benefited not only from a classical education in Latin but from specialized artistic training. Far from merely one artist's attempt to dodge the appearance of intellectual pretension, Millet's stated association of himself with the rural *gens* of France speaks to his position within the aesthetic and cultural milieu of the Second Empire. Paintings of the Barbizon School (c. 1830-1870), with their depictions of harvests and farm laborers, featured prominently in European salon exhibitions of the period and garnered acclaim across the Atlantic as well.

L'Angélus (1857-9), Millet's masterpiece of rural life and folk religious practice, and arguably the most popular of these Barbizon paintings, would in the final decades of the century inspire a bidding frenzy among French and American dealers, museums, and art institutes that drove the value of the painting up to 800,000 francs (Boime 130).

Commissioned by Thomas Appleton, the brother-in-law of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *L'Angélus* acquired its current title only after Appleton neglected to purchase the work and Millet added the steeple of the church at Chailly-en-Bière to the painting's background. The painting (Fig. 1.1) takes up a standard subject of the Barbizon School, a rural landscape near the forests of Fontainebleau south of Paris. Two figures stand in the foreground, their heads bowed in prayer. The steeple visible on the horizon, the agricultural implements temporarily discarded by the farmers' sides, the mixed violet and pink shades of the sky, and the title of the painting itself all suggest that their daily work completed, the woman and the man have paused (perhaps prompted by the ringing of the church bells) for the Angelus. Per Catholic tradition, the recitation of the Angelus occurs at six o'clock in the morning, noon, and six o'clock in the evening, framing the work-day within liturgical time. What we see in Millet's *L'Angélus* represents the day's final recitation of the prayer that recalls the central mystery of Christianity, the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity (Christ, *logos, verbum,* the Word) in the womb of the Virgin Mary – *et Verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis.*

Critic Albert Boime points out in *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle, 1848-1871* (2008) how the folk Catholicism of Millet's grandmother might have influenced both the subject matter and the somber atmosphere of the painting. In Millet's correspondence we discover how, upon hearing the ringing of the bells for the Angelus, he and his grandmother "abruptly interrupted our tasks and recited the Angelus for the wretched dead, very piously and with our hats in hand"

Fig. 1.1: Jean-François Millet. *L'Angélus*, 1857-9. (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

(qtd. in Boime 128). The posture clearly parallels that of the farmers in *L'Angélus*. Much has also been made of how Millet's grandmother harped on him regularly for what she perceived as his neglect of the traditional religious practices of his upbringing. While living in Paris in 1847, Millet received a letter from his grandmother that expressed an interest in his professional artistic success in the metropolis but also noted that she was

> still more anxious to know whether you have taken any steps in order to profit by the indulgences accorded this Jubilee Year. It would be most unfortunate for us if we did not do our best to become worthy of so great a grace, and if we were not partakers of the Easter Communion. (qtd in Boime 807)

In Boime's estimation, the grandmother's letters to the young artist "played upon his guilt for abandoning the hearth and the rituals of Catholicism" (807).

In these biographical details surrounding Millet's artistic output, broader patterns of concern common to the nineteenth-century West can be discerned – the haunting of the industrialized cosmopolis by the older cultural forms it has neglected and the anxiety of the liberal subject regarding modernity's perceived "weightlessness" and lack of norms (Lears 41). These anxieties, especially when discussed in the framework of the romanticization of rural life and practice, might tempt us into creating a dichotomy between the rural *volk* utterly resistant to modernity and an elite urban class unequivocally "liberated" from the demands of tradition. Millet's own experiences and art give the lie to this binary; they speak to the complicated attraction of the urban to the rural, the metropole to the margins, the cosmopolis to the *locus*. This tension came into play as well in the reception and reappropriation of Millet's painting across the Atlantic.

The November 1893 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* includes a sketch by George DuMaurier, the grandfather of Daphne DuMaurier of "The Birds" and *Rebecca* fame, depicting a child's misinterpretation of Millet's *L'Angélus* (Fig. 1.2). In the black-and-white

A NEW READING OF A FAMOUS PICTURE.—Drawn by GEORGE DU MAURIER.
"Oh, look—grandpapa! Poor things....they're burying the baby!"

Fig. 1.2: George DuMaurier. "A New Reading of a Famous Picture." The caption reads: "Oh look—grandpapa! Poor things . . . they're burying the baby!"

sketch, members of a well-to-do family gather around the painting. The young boy at the drawing's focal point, flanked by his parents to the left and his grandfather to the right, examines *L'Angélus* with his hands tucked in his pockets. A caption provides the boy's exclamation: "Oh look – grandpapa! Poor things . . . they're burying the baby!" A number of errors play into the boy's interpretation of the painting: his mistaking of the basket at the woman's feet for the bassinet of a deceased infant, the pitchfork for a grave-digging shovel, and the pious posture of the farmers for an attitude of mourning. (Incidentally, the twentieth-century surrealist Salvador Dalí also believed that Millet intended to depict an infant's burial but had later painted a basket of potatoes over what would have been the baby's coffin.)[1] The child lacks the cultural context to decipher the French title of the painting or the Roman Catholic prayer to which the title refers. Yet for all the insufficiency of the child's hermeneutic horizons, his misinterpretation of Millet's work does prompt him toward sympathetic relation with the figures depicted, even if this sympathy must be filtered through bourgeois pity for the rural peasantry as "poor things." The dark humor of DuMaurier's sketch relies upon the ability of the *Harper's* reader to know better than the boy, to be able to identify the child's interpretation as a misreading of Millet's painting. We cannot take such an ability for granted. A possibly apocryphal but often-reprinted anecdote holds that an American art dealer, overstocked with copies of *L'Angélus* that would not sell, retitled them *Burying the Baby* – after which they quickly sold out. It remains unclear if DuMaurier's sketch references this anecdote or if the art dealer devised the marketing ploy after seeing the *Harper's* cartoon (DeGrouchy 51).

[1] For translated passages from Salvador Dalí's interpretation of the painting, see the excerpts from "Millet's *L'Angélus*" and "The Tragic Myth of Millet's *L'Angélus*" in *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí,* ed. and trans. by Haim Finkelstein (Cambridge UP, 1998). Later, a Louvre X-ray of *L'Angélus* would reveal that the basket of potatoes had, in fact, been painting over a rectangular object. Though Dalí would seize upon these results as proof that he was correct about sensing the painting's drive towards "the synthetic, fecund, and nourishing potato of death," art scholars differ on whether this rectangular object actually represents a coffin (280).

Here is where we return from Millet's France to the American literary culture that circulated in magazines such as *Harper's, The Century*, *Scribner's,* and *The Atlantic Monthly* in the postbellum era. I argue that the position of the child in the sketch – and the wryly humorous confusion of the burial and the Angelus – parallels the position of American readers of regionalist texts that appeared in these same national periodicals in the late-nineteenth century. Local color flourished in part because of these magazines and their associated publishing houses. With the support and encouragement of William Dean Howells, the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* from 1871-1881, authors such as Mary Noailles Murfree (Tennessee), Charles Chesnutt (North Carolina), Mary Wilkins Freeman (Massachusetts / New England), Abraham Cahan (Jewish neighborhoods of New York City), and Sarah Orne Jewett (Maine) published work depicting the dialects, folkways, and local idiosyncrasies of their own particular regions of the United States. These texts allowed readers to access unfamiliar and putatively exotic corners of the American cultural landscape, rendering these spaces at least partially legible to outsiders. As Hamlin Garland, a local colorist in his own right and author of the masterful and frequently-anthologized local color story "Up the Coolee," argued in his 1894 regionalist manifesto *Crumbling Idols*, "It is the differences which interest us; the similarities do not please, do not forever stimulate and feed as do the differences" (57). Garland traces the development of American literary regionalism from William Cullen Bryant and James Fenimore Cooper's work through John Greenleaf Whittier's *Snow-Bound* through the antebellum frontier tales of "wild life from Texas, from Ohio, and from Illinois" that offered "rough-and-ready anecdotes" (61). In the American literary marketplace following the Civil War, Garland sees regionalism achieve its apotheosis: "The corn has flowered, and the cotton-boll has broken into speech. Local color –

what is it? It means the writer spontaneously reflects the life which goes on around him. It is natural and unstrained art" (62).

Despite the indisputable fact – demonstrated most clearly in Bill Hardwig's *Upon Provincialism: Southern Literature and National Periodical Culture, 1870-1900* (2013) – that locals themselves were not always the authors or readers of local color, Garland's insistence upon the realism of local color (that it "reflects the life") resonates with the approach of many of his contemporaries. The commitment to literary realism that buttressed Garland's claims about local color also undergirded the approach of William Dean Howells. As he encouraged local colorists of the 1870s and 1880s to publish, Howells also articulated his own aesthetic theory in his written appreciations of their work. In his "Editor's Study" from the December 1887 issue of *Harper's Monthly*, Howells imagines an author importuned by a critic to not depict a real grasshopper found in the meadow but rather to work from a pre-existing model of the ideal grasshopper despite this model being made from "wire and card-board, very prettily painted in a conventional tint . . . You may say that it's artificial. Well, it *is* artificial; but then it's ideal too; and what you want to do is to cultivate the ideal" (155). Howells interjects to defend the real over and against the ideal, urging the reader to exhibit the fortitude to "reject the ideal grasshopper wherever he finds it, in science, in literature, in art . . . because it is not like a real grasshopper" (155). Howells hopes for the day when the "good old romantic card-board grasshopper, must die out before the simple, honest, and natural grasshopper" (155). Here Howells articulates the very notion of realism that would come to be seen as the aim of local color literature – to render dialects, local landscapes, and ethnic folkways precisely and accurately. In this, as Stephanie Foote argues in *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2001), Howells becomes "seduced by regionalism's impossible claims to represent

accurately the real" (9). Here Howells also reinforces a dichotomy between the real and the ideal, one that the local colorists he solicited work from so often troubled and complicated in their writing. Where might we place the squawking of Madame Lebrun's parrot under such a strict dichotomy? The parrot, of course, exists at the intersection of the "real" world of literary realism (with its ethnographic touches, its localized dialect) and the "ideal" world of romantic symbols and confrontation with unintelligibility, untranslatability, and mystery.

As they encountered these putatively realistic depictions of regional distinctiveness, readers – like the child in DuMaurier's sketch – had to grapple with the limitations of their local knowledge. Before them were texts that appeared to offer insights into other places and other people, but these texts also contained roadblocks to interpretation. The unfamiliar could be presented with accuracy but nonetheless remain impenetrable at certain levels. This dissertation examines this space of tension between local color's aesthetic goals that stem from its roots in literary realism (to render spaces legible to a national readership and to participate in a project of cultural history and ethnography) and goals that stem from its often-neglected roots in nineteenth-century literary romanticism (to render those same spaces simultaneously exotic, mysterious, and strategically illegible). This tension not only represents a clash of literary expectations but also a clash of epistemologies – one that places its faith in philosophical empiricism and the other that remains open to mystery as a crucial aspect of being. Such tensions, of course, lead to interpretative problems if one approaches local color as an either/or instead of a both/and enterprise – as did many individuals involved in the disputes this dissertation explores. Our hermeneutic approach to local color must take into account both of these impulses and acknowledge the fruits that arise from their interpenetration. Far from being a quaint off-shoot of nineteenth-century American literary realism, local color asserts itself under

this interpretative model as a deceptively complex mode of literature that underscores the limitations of our own abilities as interpreters and cautions us to proceed in our interpretations with a kind of epistemological humility with regard to the extent to which we can claim definitive knowledge.

Part of the tension between local color's ethnographic and romantic impulses can be connected to the fact that local color often presents two competing nineteenth-century visions of the world. In the most stereotypical examples of local color stories, an outsider or interloper from urban "modernity" finds himself in a remote community somehow carrying on with its own set of shared meanings, histories, and local practices apart from the industrialized world. This, of course, is a massive generalization. However, it does sketch out in broad terms the ways in which local color texts contrast the urban and the rural, the modern and the traditional. These competing models of life represented within the texts parallel on some levels the competing impulses between history and romance that defined local color as a literary mode. Though of course not all local color texts are able to reach a kind of Hegelian synthesis between these two impulses (eg. Felix Voorhies's 1907 inability in *Acadian Reminiscences* to distinguish between historical fact and historical fiction), I am fascinated by the texts that *are* able to hold both in productive balance. George Washington Cable's novel *The Grandissimes* (1880) renders accurate transcriptions of black Creole song lyrics while nonetheless utilizing a narrative voice that keeps readers ever unsure they have the same understanding of events as the local characters. Lafcadio Hearn similarly uses a careful ear to render a dizzying variety of dialects and foreign languages in his novella *Chita* (1888) but leaves large passages of dialogue in these languages untranslated, forcing the readers to confront the limitations of their local knowledge. In the stories of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's collection *The Goodness of St. Rocque* (1899), racially-ambiguous characters

move through geographic settings so painstakingly un-ambiguous as to create a jarring yet beautiful aesthetic that juxtaposes utter certainty with utter uncertainty. The aesthetic logic of these texts resembles the comic logic of both/and as opposed to the tragic logic of either/or – both traditional and modern, both ethnographic and romantic, both empirical and mystical, both Old World and New World, both Catholic and Protestant.[2] Local color allows us to enjoy multiplicity – of approaches to the world, to knowledge, to literary representation. These elements interact with one another within the texts in a kind of (if I may be a bit whimsical with the term) creole aesthetics that blends literary realism and literary romanticism.

Local color writing about Creole and Cajun Louisiana captures not only the both/and of realism and romanticism but also the both/and of tradition and modernity. Though published after the height of local color literary production (and thus outside of the official boundaries of this dissertation), Lyle Saxon's playful memoir and city guide *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928) offers us a hybrid vision of how traditional community folk practices find niches wherein to survive and perhaps even flourish within modernity. One section of *Fabulous New Orleans*

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[2] One scene from the early history of New Orleans that stands out for the blending of Old World and New World traditions as well as Catholicism and Protestantism is the solemn reception of General Andrew Jackson in the city following his successful routing of General Packenham's troops at the Battle of New Orleans on the plains of Chalmette. Sparing no pageantry, the city erected triumphal arches and received the Anglo-Protestant frontiersman Jackson into St. Louis Cathedral as a conquering hero with a solemn singing of the *Te Deum* – the Catholic hymn of thanksgiving. It is a scene more worthy of grand opera or a Renaissance fresco than something one might imagine happening to a Tennessee colonel turned major general:

"The whole square [present-day Jackson Square], and the streets leading to it, were thronged with people. The triumphal arch was supported by six columns. Amongst those on the right was a young lady representing Justice, and on the left another representing Liberty. Under the arch were two young children, each on a pedestal, holding a crown of laurel. From the arch, in the middle of the square to the church, at proper intervals, were ranged young ladies, representing the different states and territories composing the American union, all dressed in white, covered with transparent veils, and wearing a silver star on their foreheads . . . . The general then proceeded to the church, amidst the salutations of the young ladies representing the different states, who strewed his passage with flowers. At the entrance of the church he was received by the abbé Dubourg, who addressed him in a speech suitable to the occasion, and conducted him to a seat prepared for him near the altar. Te Deum was chanted with impressive solemnity" (Latour 199-200).

describes and reprints notices that appear in the city's *Times Picayune* newspaper from residents wanting to thank Catholic saints for particular answered prayers. In the fluid model offered in the pages of the *Times-Picayune*, traditional communities of faith actually find new modes of ritualistic expression within and because of developments in modern capitalism. This is the kind of vision I argue local color offers – the ethos of the both/and – that allows us more fruitful ways of conceiving of the relationship between competing approaches to the world, to knowledge, and to literary representation. Pulled at random from an April 1928 issue of the *Picayune*, the columns quoted by Saxon show residents of the city offering thanksgiving to the Virgin Mary and a variety of saints, following generally the same format: "Many thanks to Our Mother of Perpetual Help, St. Anthony and St. Theresa for special favors granted. Publication promised. Mrs. Robert Aguilera" and "Thanks to Our Lady of Prompt Succor for saving city from flood last May. M.B.V." (304; 305). Because Saxon reprints the entirety of the personal column from this issue of the newspaper, these notes of thanks are interspersed with other inquiries and notices, including those of several husbands declaring their divorces from their wives. Between two thanksgiving notices to St. Raymond and St. Theresa of the Little Flower comes this notice: "NOT responsible for the debts contracted by my wife, Dinna Moran Durnin. Richard M. Durnin" (Saxon 306). This merging of modern print culture with traditional piety offers us a syncretic blend, a means of escaping from an either/or conception of the relations between traditional folk practice and modernity and an escape as well from the kind of modernity that T.J. Jackson Lears in *No Place of Grace* (1994) defines as characterized by the "weightlessness" of secular anomie (46).

Local Color Louisiana: Historical and Literary Contexts

While this dissertation will open with a chapter on George Washington Cable, this is not to say that regionally-conscious writing in south Louisiana began with the local color movement or with its practitioners from the area – Cable, Hearn, Dunbar-Nelson, Chopin. In fact, even in the literature of antebellum Louisiana we find a similar pairing between an explanatory ethnography of the state's ethnic and racial populations and a conscious reveling in the exotic and the mysterious elements of the state's culture. Earlier literary production in the area, much of it, unsurprisingly, in French, celebrated the distinctively local aspects of life in the region. In 1845, a group of free persons of color (*les gens du couleur libres*) led by Armand Lanusse published the first poetry anthology written and published by black authors in the United States – *Les Cenelles* (trans. *The Hawthorn Berries*). Lanusse's own contributions to this collection include a jaunty appreciation for the whirl of Carnival season in the city as well as politically astute poems such as one that offers his wry critique of the New Orleans practice of *plaçage*. In "Epigramme," we find a dialogue during the sacrament of confession between a presumably white priest ("un bon pasteur") and a shrewd female penitent of color. The priest, confronted with the same yearly list of sins from the parishioner, remarks with exasperation, "Vous ne voulez donc pas renoncer à Satan" (Lanusse 94). The penitent admits to the priest that she will encounter fewer near occasions of sin if he finds a way to "place" her daughter: "Que ne puis-je pasteur – Quoi donc? – *placer* ma fille?" (Lanusse 94). The verb *placer* here defies adequate translation, as its subtext goes beyond the literal meaning of "to place" or "to give a position to," referring instead to the practice of *plaçage* in which women of color would be taken as mistresses by wealthy white men. Even modern English translations of *Les Cenelles* attempt with difficulty to render in English verse a term so specific to the nineteenth-century Francophone communities of Creoles

of color. In yet another indication of how even early regional texts resist interpretation or translation, Latortue and Adams's 1979 translation of the poem improperly renders "un bon pasteur" as "a good preacher," a term rarely used in Catholicism to describe priests, especially those serving in their pastoral function as confessor, and seemingly more suited to the Anglo-Protestantism *Les Cenelles* sets itself in conscious contrast against (Lanusse 95; Haddox 70).

Other early New Orleanian poets such as the white Creole Louis Allard opted for an imitation of French Romantic poets or delicate poetic translations of Ancient Roman epigrams. Allard's "A Priscus" riffs on an epigram from the first-century poet Marcus Valerius Martial to offer a suggestively minimalist quatrain:

Priscus, avant de te connaître,
Je t'appelais mon seigneur et mon maître;
Aussitôt que je te connus,
Je t'appleai Priscus, et rien de plus. (6)[3]

So while not all of the output of these early New Orleans writers espoused explicitly regionalist concerns, it does provide evidence of a rich literary culture well before the Civil War and the advent of such New Orleans local colorists as George Washington Cable, Lafcadio Hearn, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, or Grace King. Even after the Civil War, a number of Francophone writers such as Charles Gayarré, poet-priest Adrien Rouquette, and Alfred Mercier kept up a literary tradition in the city rarely linked with the work of the local colorists (most likely due to academic disciplinary divides between Francophone and Anglophone literary studies). This dissertation occasionally nods to the ways that the literary output of these Francophone authors (many of whom could write and speak English) interacted with and informed the work of their local colorist counterparts. These authors, acutely sensitive to maintaining a Francophone literary

[3] "Priscus, back in the days before / We met, I called you 'lord and master'; then / We met, and when I spoke of you again, / I called you 'Priscus' and nothing more" (Allard 7) – translation by Norman Shapiro.

culture in south Louisiana, undertook their literary enterprises for motivations both aesthetic and preservationist. In 1876 the white Creole doctor Alfred Mercier founded the Athénée Louisianais, an intellectual community that published the French literary journal *Comptes-rendus de L'Athénée Louisianais* and that continued publishing Francophone literature in Louisiana up until 1951 (Fertel 50; Weiss 129). Like the work of Cable, Hearn, Dunbar-Nelson, and Chopin, Mercier's writing blends elements of literary romanticism and ethnography. His antebellum poem "Patrie" (1842) imagines a typically romantic scene of a young man mourning his lost youth and childhood home, now in ruins:

Meschacebé, tu me vis autrefois
Jouer, enfant, sur ta rive sonore;
Père des eaux, tu me revois encore
Bondir d'ivresse aux longs bruits de ta voix.

Quelle est là-bas cette maison qui tombe,
Vers le chemin qui mène à Gentilly?
Sur son front plane un silence de tombe,
Elle paraît condamnée à l'oubli. (130)[4]

Yet, like the Anglophone local colorists who would join the New Orleans literary scene after the Civil War, Mercier's romantic literary impulses operated alongside desires for ethnographic study and accurate depiction – for both historical preservation and literary aesthetics – of regional folkways and practices. In fact, as Rien Fertel points out in *Imagining the Creole City: The Rise of Literary Culture in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (2014), Mercier went on to publish the first essay on black dialects of Louisiana Creole French in 1880 (51). Thus, even outside of the boundaries of the local color movement as understood by American literary studies, we find similar mixes of impulses and literary modes. This project, however, will remain

[4] "O Meschacebé! [French rendering of Mississippi] You saw me rejoice / In childish games by your resounding shore; / Father of Waters, you see me once more / Leap, drunk with joy, to hear your long-drawn voice! / What house is that, en route to Gentilly, / That crumbles and decays, now all but rotten? / The silence of the tomb hangs ponderously / About its brow, destined to stand forgotten" (Mercier 131) – translated by Norman Shapiro.

within the boundaries of local color as traditionally understood, insofar as the period from 1865-1914 represents the high-water mark of consciously cultivated regional output in American periodical culture. During the postbellum moment, these texts circulated to national audiences far more frequently than they had before the Civil War and reached readers from a variety of regional contexts. In studying them one encounters various opportunities to explore how non-locals grappled with interpretive difficulties presented by the local particularities of these texts.

If we understand local color to mean a particular tradition of American regionalist writing that flourished in national periodical culture between the end of the Civil War and the outbreak of the First World War, then the story of local color writing in Louisiana should open with the arrival of a man named Edward King in New Orleans for a Mardi Gras parade in 1873. The following year would find Canal Street engulfed in the Battle of Liberty Place – an insurrection led by white supremacists that included a pitched street battle, the deposition of Governor William Pitt Kellogg, and the shooting and capture of Confederate veteran General James Longstreet, pulled from his horse as he tried to calm the White League paramilitary attempting to overthrow the city's government[5]. But in late winter of 1873, Canal Street was full of revelers rather than rioters as the Mistick Krewe of Comus rolled down the boulevard. The krewe's theme that year – blending the Old World Catholic tradition of pre-Lenten carnival with modern satire – was "Missing Links to Darwin's Origins of the Species" (Mitchell 65). Lampooning a number of public figures (including many Radical Republicans), the parade both expressed political grievance and a sense of the bacchic disruption of the carnivalesque (Fig. 1.3). Sent to report on the parade was Edward King, a Massachusetts-born journalist working for *Scribner's Monthly*. During the course of his reporting, he encountered a local journalist out to cover the Krewe of

[5] Kate Chopin's husband Oscar was present – on the side of the White League – at the Battle of Liberty Place (Toth 77).

Fig. 1.3: Costume design sketches from the Mistick Krewe of Comus's 1873 parade, themed "Missing Links to Darwin's Origin of the Species." From top-left, clockwise: A carpetbagger reimagined as a fox; President Ulysses S. Grant as a tobacco grub; a ram dressed as an eighteenth-century gentleman; a zebra. It was at this parade that Edward King and George Washington Cable first met one another. (Source: Tulane University Digital Library, Carnival Collection)

Comus as well – George Washington Cable (Turner 51).

Their initial meeting was brief, but later King would find in Cable an invaluable resource for local lore. Along with illustrator J. Wells Champney, King had ventured to New Orleans on behalf of *Scribner's Monthly* as part of a much larger project aimed at documenting the regional particularities of the American South. The material, published as magazine articles under the heading of "The Great South," sought, according to the introduction to the book version published in 1875, "by pen and pencil, to give the reading public a truthful picture of life in a section which has, since the close of a devastating war, been overwhelmed by a variety of misfortunes, but upon which the dawn of a better day is breaking" (King i). Cable invited King and Champney to his home, where they heard him read a set of short stories that previously he had recited aloud only for his family. Impressed, King took copies of Cable's stories back north, including "Bibi," which failed to find a publisher, and "'Sieur George," which was picked up by *Scribner's*. Though King would later insist that "Cable discovered himself," this initial meeting between the two jumpstarted Cable's literary career and led to a renewed national interest in reading about the local folkways, dialects, and cultural elements of New Orleans and south Louisiana (Biklé 51).

Yet, what constituted "a truthful picture" of New Orleans was not universally agreed upon. Cable quickly made enemies on multiple fronts given his depiction of sexual and social mixing between white Creoles and Creoles of color and his advocacy for progressive racial politics. Charles Gayarré, a former state senator, historian, and descendant of a proud colonial Franco-Spanish lineage, denounced Cable as traitor to the city and castigated him for alleged historical errors. The poet-priest Adrien Rouquette who had fled the city to live with the Choctaw north of Lake Pontchartrain published an anonymous pamphlet denouncing Cable for

confusing romance and historical reality. One young New Orleans local, Grace King, complained of Cable's alleged inaccuracies to Richard Watson Gilder, the editor of the national *Century Magazine* who was in town for the 1884 World Cotton Centennial. She bemoaned "his preference for colored people over white" and asserted that Cable had "stabbed the city in the back . . . in a dastardly way to please the Northern press" (King 60). According to King, "He [Gilder] listened to me with icy indifference, and the rest of our walk was accomplished in silence, except for one remark. 'Why,' he said, 'if Cable is so false to you, why do not some of you write better?'" (King 60). The remark stung King, but it prompted her own local color contributions, including stories that would later be published in *Tales of a Time and Place* (1892) and *Balcony Stories* (1893). One might venture to say that King's literary output, romantic as it is, ironically emerges out of her initial desire for realism in literature about her beloved city.

Not all of Cable's readers responded to his work with scorn. The bizarre, half-blind, bohemian, Greek-born Lafcadio Hearn appeared in New Orleans in 1877 eager to see firsthand the settings of Cable's stories. Hearn arrived fresh from a journalism career in Cincinnati during which he had engaged in such sensational stunts as being strapped to a church steeple-climber and drinking a tumbler-full of cattle blood from a slaughterhouse. He soon joined Cable in his ethnographic ventures. At first glance, the two seem the quintessential odd couple. Cable, a fastidious Presbyterian, during a reading tour with Mark Twain allegedly resisted traveling on the Sabbath so as not to force anyone employed in the transportation business to work (Turner 185). In the evenings, he indulged in innocent snacks of ice cream while Twain drank ale (Turner 172). Hearn, on the other hand, was a frequenter of levee-bars in Cincinnati's notoriously rough Bucktown neighborhood and at one point purchased the services of a prostitute of color only to be found by a friend later walking around her prone nude body, carefully examining her with his

one good eye six inches from her skin (Cott 181). Yet what they lacked in shared temperament, Cable and Hearn made up for in their common interest in recording, as accurately as possible, the peculiarities of the Crescent City.

At times Hearn's ethnographic impulse came up against his limitations as an outsider to access local knowledge. When he heard an enigmatic Creole song lyric, "Tig, tig, malaboin / La chelema che tango / Redjoum!", Hearn sought answers from black New Orleanians. In a 1878 letter to his friend H.E. Krehbiel, Hearn writes:

> I asked my black nurse what it meant. She only laughed and shook her head, — "Mais c'est Voudoo, ça, je n'en sais rien!" "Well," said I, "don't you know anything about Voudoo songs?" "Yes," she answered, "*I know Voudoo songs; but I can't tell you what they mean.*" And she broke out into the wildest, weirdest ditty I ever heard. I tried to write down the words; but as I did not know what they meant I had to write by sound alone, spelling the words according to the French pronunciation: — 'Yo so dan godo / Héru mandé . . . Tigà la papa / No Tingodisé / Tigà la papa / Ha Tinguoaiée.'" (Bisland 192-3)

Yet despite the occasional frustrations they caused, these moments of impenetrability also drew Hearn deeper into the culture of the city and propelled his desire for ethnographic accuracy even as meaning retreated from him into mystery. Hearn became a compelling figure for even the reclusive Adrien Rouquette, who published in the local Catholic newspaper *Le Propagateur* a Creole quatrain invitation for Hearn to meet him in the Choctaw village: "To papa, li sorti péi-Anglé / Mé to mama, li sorti ile la Gréce. / Pour to vini oir moin, zami Boklé/ Li minnin toi, avek plin politesse" (qtd. in Cott 158).[6] If Cable and Hearn could transcend differences in temperament over their shared love of New Orleans history and culture, the same was not true of Rouquette and Hearn, who quarreled not only about the proper way to phonetically render the Creole language but also over Hearn's hedonistic lifestyle. When Rouquette joined the forces of

[6] "Your daddy came from the country of England / But your momma, she came from the islands of Greece. / If you want to come and see me, my friend Boklé / Will bring you here with full courtesy." (Translation mine)

Gayarré and King against Cable, Hearn no longer mentioned his work in his published essays (Cott 159).

This has so far been only the history of how white local colorists in Louisiana approached the interplay between realism and romanticism, but, of course, authors of color had been engaging in similar literary enterprises that documented their own histories, customs, and folkways. Born in New Orleans in 1875, the year after the Battle of Liberty Place, Alice Ruth Moore (later Alice Dunbar-Nelson) would follow Cable and Hearn in documenting local life in the city and the surrounding area. A descendant of a mother born as a slave near the Cajun city of Opelousas in south-central Louisiana and a possibly white father, Dunbar-Nelson grew up in an ambiguous middle-ground between racial groups and for the remainder of her life and career would occupy tenuous spaces between races and social classes. After making her literary debut with a potpourri of juvenalia in *Violets, and Other Tales* (1895), she found continued success with her major short story collection *The Goodness of St. Rocque* (1899) – in which racially ambiguous characters move through carefully charted geographies of New Orleans. In the era following the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) – a decision that declared that Louisiana's separate streetcar act was constitutional so long as black and white passengers had "separate but equal" cars – determining racial identity continued to operate as a legal means of policing of how individuals navigated through the city even as it provided the dramatic tension that propelled literature about the color line. Like Cable and Hearn, though on the other side of the racial divide, Dunbar-Nelson engaged in an aesthetics that held local specificity in fruitful and compelling tension with aesthetic indeterminacy, even if this indeterminacy led to critics (unfairly) characterizing her work as apolitical.

Dunbar-Nelson, in fact, was no stranger to activism and had direct connections to the Comité des Citoyens, a progressive political organization made up of Creoles of color as well as whites and non-Creole blacks. It was this Comité that organized Homer Plessy's ride on a white streetcar to instigate a legal challenge to the existing segregationist statute. Another member of the Comité, Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, would go on to provide the most crucial literary and historical statement from the Creole of color community of the period – *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire* (1911). The book sketched out portraits of various black Creole Louisianans of note, including Armand Lanusse – poet and organizer of the antebellum anthology *Les Cenelles* – as well as the dramatist and short story writer Victor Séjour. It was an attempt to assert that black Louisianans had contributed to the literature and culture of the region as well, and it elicited at least partial positive notice from white Louisianan literati of the period. Upon receiving a complimentary copy of the book from Desdunes, the white Creole preservationist and author Alfred Mercier reportedly exclaimed, "Je ne croyais pas qu' à la Nouvelle-Orléans il y avait encore un nègre qui pourrait écrire le français de cette façon-là" (qtd. in O'Neill xix).[7]

In addition to local colorists of color, the Cajuns in the rural parishes to the west of New Orleans offered their own humble contributions to local color literature written about south Louisiana. Cable himself had encouraged Cajun author Sidonie de la Houssaye in the composition of her novel *Pouponne et Balthazar* (1888) even as he accepted the Franklin, Louisiana, author's assistance with his own novel of the Cajun parishes, *Bonaventure* (1888). Yet being written in French limited Cajun texts' accessibility to a national reading public and a national periodical culture – and here we find yet another example of how the divide between Francophone and Anglophone academic study creates certain barriers to understanding the complex scope of Louisiana literary production. If Cajun local color written by Cajuns in French

[7] "I didn't believe that in New Orleans there was still a Negro who could write French in this fashion!"

during this period is rare, Anglophone Cajun local color writing by Cajun authors themselves is rarer, and one example – Judge Felix Voorhies's *Acadian Reminiscences, with the True Story of Evangeline* (1907) – occupies an even rarer space of local color literature written for a local readership. It would be up to outsiders like the Missouri transplant Kate Chopin to popularize local color about the Cajuns in such collections as *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897), though some of these stories themselves (particularly "A Gentleman of Bayou Teche") demonstrate Chopin's own awareness of the pitfalls of literary representation of a community by a writer from outside of that community.

Katherine O'Flaherty Chopin moved from St. Louis, Missouri, to New Orleans with her husband Oscar in the early 1870s and later relocated with him to the small town of Cloutierville in Natchitoches Parish in 1879, where Chopin's own urban fashions and quirks made her something of a character among the residents (Toth 87). Following Oscar's death Chopin began publishing prolifically and widely. Most famous during her lifetime for her local color short stories and sketches, twenty-first century readers remember her primarily for her masterwork *The Awakening* (1899), a novel that – though perhaps not best described as regionalist – I argue represents the apotheosis of local color's concern with competing and seemingly irreconcilable duties to traditional institutions and structures and the duties to oneself under the model of a modern, "liberated" selfhood. In its dramatization of the limitations of human mutual- and self-understanding, its tragedy lies in the inability of its lead character to imagine a both/and model of life. I argue that *The Awakening* represents a radical exploration of key tensions related to local color. It dramatizes the conflict between seemingly irreconcilable duties to traditional structures (the family) and the attractions of an ultimately ambivalent liberation offered by modernity – a

conflict often found in local color literature. In its conclusion with the death of Edna, it tragically acknowledges the limitations of interpersonal understanding and expression.

Resisting Romanticism: Previous Literary Critical Approaches to Local Color

I envision this dissertation as part of the critical tradition of discussing reader reception of local color and as such indebted to the work of Richard Brodhead and Bill Hardwig. Brodhead's *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993) examines how various strands of literary production in the nineteenth century "arose in differently organized (if adjacent literary-social worlds, in differently structured cultural settings composed around writing and regulating its social life" (5). In doing so, he also calls attention to how nineteenth-century writers called forth particular audiences: "Each of these schemes of literary production is bound up with a distinct social audience: *in* its production each addresses and helps call together some particular social grouping" (5). Within this framework Brodhead views literary regionalism in the nineteenth century as "a genre for the elite" that allowed bourgeois readers to enjoy a kind of literary tourism of unfamiliar spaces (206). Later Bill Hardwig, in *Upon Provincialism: Southern Literature and National Periodical Culture, 1870-1900* (2013), would expand beyond this consideration of local color as merely an elite pleasure in exotic locales and encourage a focus on how these texts engaged directly with substantive issues of their period. Hardwig also structures his work around the "premise that the South was treated in specific ways in national periodicals of the era and that exploring this specificity tells us as much about the readership and editorship of these periodicals as it does about the subject matter of the stories" (16). While at times my own project will delve into historicist specifics of reader reception, I often speak of reception and readerly interaction with texts more broadly –

even touching upon how we as readers today grapple with interpreting the puzzling and enigmatic facets of local color texts. The opening for me to speak about reader reception more broadly has been made possible by Brodhead's and Hardwig's work, which turned scholarly attention towards how readers (then and now) interact with local color literature.

This leads us to this dissertation's most significant intervention in the scholarly conversation about local color literature. This project examines a tension that exists between two conflicting impulses that drove local color writing – one that sought to participate in an ethnographic project rooted in literary realism, the other that reveled in representing local spaces as sites of ambiguity, uncertainty, illegibility, and impenetrability. "Translating Chopin's Parrot" argues that literary historicist scholarship, drawn to the ethnographic elements of local color, often elides or fails to account for the tension that exists between these elements and those that, in accentuating indeterminacy and mystery, contest and complicate ethnography's empirical presuppositions. Unsurprisingly, this tension has led to interpretive conflicts over the most fruitful approach to reading local color literature. This project divides these hermeneutic conflicts into four categories – conflicts over definitions, translations, mappings, and misreadings of genre. Before discussing these categories in detail, however, I want to first chart a brief history of how scholars have approached the question of local color literature's relation to what have been traditionally viewed as the dominant literary modes of the nineteenth-century – literary realism and literary romanticism.

Eric Sundquist, in his article "Realism and Regionalism" in the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), follows the lead of Hamlin Garland and William Dean Howells insofar as he treats local color as an offshoot of American literary realism. Positioning it within the realm of nineteenth-century realist aesthetics (aesthetics that appeared in such varied

forms as Garland's insistence on local color literary veritism, Balzac and Zola's obsession with rendering the city of Paris in painstaking detail, and the Italian operatic tradition of *verismo* exemplified by Leoncavallo and Mascagni), Sundquist argues that local color constitutes a delimited form of realism arising out of strictly rural zones, or, as he curiously refers to them, "colonized regions" (503). His catalogue of regionalist texts leans much more heavily towards novels that exhibit regionalist features rather than short stories and sketches – a curious choice given the now near-dictum that local color flourished in these more concise literary forms. Even Donna Campbell in her identically-titled essay "Realism and Regionalism" initially follows Sundquist's lead in delineating those elements that "distinguish local color or regional fiction from mainstream realism," with the implication that the two modes exist on the same continuum (93). Campbell also notes how the relationship between local color and realism became muddied in the so-called "revolt from the village" in the twentieth century, as writers like Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson began depicting small, rural communities as repressive cultural deserts (94). Her account continues the tradition that started with Garland and Howells of focusing on local color as a form of realism that set itself in contrast to a romanticized view of country life. Local color, under this framework, kills the romantic grasshopper as Howells intended.

Campbell's *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915* (1997) continues to speak of local color in terms of its relation to realism: "Realism was not all local color, of course, and yet a continual thread of feeling runs through the works of Norris and other naturalists: that 'real life,' the stuff of literature, was not the same as the realists' teacup tragedies, and that the fit ones to write about real life were men (naturalists), not women (local color writers)" (5). As such she opens a fascinating discussion of the implicit masculinity of Garland's conception of local color as well as later critiques of the effeminacy of Howellsian

realism by naturalists and by Modernists such as Sinclair Lewis who infamously denounced Howells as sharing the ethos of "a pious old maid whose greatest delight is to have tea at the vicarage" (244). Yet here we find Campbell still keeping romanticism at arm's length, and, in fact, her book uses the term *romance* most frequently in the sense of a genre about affairs of the heart rather than as a reference to literary romanticism.

The same is true, surprisingly, of Fetterley and Pryse's *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (2003). Though their massive project asserts regionalism's role as an aesthetic critique of oppressive power structures that rule (*regere*) over women and marginalized spaces and peoples, it barely mentions romanticism as a literary mode and, like Donna Campbell's book, utilizes the word *romantic* most often to describe amorous relationships between two people. Fetterley and Pryse's insistence on regionalism as a form of critique also imposes rigid and unnecessary limits on what counts as regional writing. While this dissertation, following the work of other scholars, uses the terms local color and regionalism relatively interchangeably, Fetterley and Pryse insist that regionalism should only be used to refer to those texts by female authors who engaged in political, social, economic, or gender-based critiques of power and who sought to redefine what constituted centrality and marginality. Local color, they argue, should be used to refer to the "wrong" sort of postbellum literature that failed to achieve the intellectual rigor or progressive politics of regionalism proper. Under this proposed terminology, the designation of local color would be applied to "literary uses of regional persons that reinforced their representation as strange, exotic, or queer" and work that evinced attitudes that "may be understood as conducive to the political imperialism of the Theodore Roosevelt era" (Fetterley and Pryse 30). The fact that Fetterley and Pryse spend pages of their book wringing their hands over where to place Charles Chesnutt – certainly a

politically-progressive and racially-marginalized author but also a man and therefore not, under their definition, a true regionalist – demonstrates the often arbitrary limitations of their categorical distinctions.

In addition to calling more attention to the romantic elements of local color than previous scholarship, this project also joins in a larger conversation about the limits of literary historicism as a methodology and the distinction between what knowledge we can and cannot achieve about literature by using such "distance reading" methods as those proposed by Franco Moretti in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005). In Chapter Three in particular, I argue most explicitly for attention to the limitations of the tools of historicism. While mapping, graphing, and charting can certainly give us insights into regional literature, relying on them as the sole methods for interpretation can seduce us into missing the forest for the trees, into seeing these tools as an end in themselves rather than as means for achieving specific and limited forms of knowledge. This is particularly relevant to local color literature insofar as there exists a critical temptation to linger longer over its ethnographic qualities and ignore its linkages to a romanticist aesthetics. Moretti himself quotes Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* as an epigraph for his *Graphs, Maps, Trees*: "A man who wants the truth becomes a scientist; a man who wants to give free play to his subjectivity may become a writer; but what should a man do who wants something in between?" (Musil 274). Thus, Moretti demonstrates his own awareness of the limits of his own work and a skepticism towards historical criticism as traditionally practiced. Allen Dunn and Thomas Haddox in their introduction to *The Limits of Literary Historicism* (2012) express skepticism as well for the concept of critical distance as an aspect of a historicist critical approach, arguing that "although political, aesthetic, and moral judgments may be incompatible with critical distance, without them such distance is merely the measure of the critic's difference from *any* locally

situated claims and commitments, and, as such, it fails to be truly critical at all" (xii-xiii) and that "value commitments . . . cannot, or at least should not, simply be dismissed as either naïve or sinister" (xiv). I express throughout this dissertation a similar skepticism with a seemingly disinterested historicism that would approach local color literature as valuable insofar as it provides us with insights into nineteenth-century elite perceptions of local others. My analysis of local color as a literary mode occupying an in-between space between empirical fact and subjective playfulness requires that I utilize historicist tools when appropriate while also keeping an eye on those textual elements that resist archival explanation or historical-cultural contextualization.

Throughout this dissertation I will continue to circle around the term *limits* – the limits of interpretation, the limits of historicism, the limits that the characters within local color texts must negotiate. Part of this stems, at least in part, from recent scholarly conversation about the importance of recognizing the limits of our particular methodologies, as can be seen in Dunn and Haddox's *The Limits of Literary Historicism* (2012) and Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015). In a much earlier critical moment, Campbell noted in *Resisting Regionalism* the liberatory quality of limits in local color, noting that even from a feminist perspective we can view the "form's limitations in a more positive light" that allows us to see "strength in, indeed through, limitation" (22). In light of these more positively valenced approaches to limitations as facts of being, this dissertation resists viewing regionalism as strictly a depiction of power relations between the center and the margins, between elite readers and local subjects. In shifting the focus towards local color as a hybrid space where realism and romanticism interact, I want to open up a discussion for the delights of the local that does not devolve into mere *topophilia* or exoticism. Instead, we might find delight in the playful, whimsical, back-and-forth qualities of

regional texts that attempt to hold the impulses of realism and romanticism, ethnography and mystery, in fruitful tension.

As such this dissertation also focuses explicitly on the subject of interpretation and our function as interpreters of texts. Much of my hermeneutical model is indebted to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (*Warheit und Methode*). Pushing back against an interpretive relativism that would mean that "every encounter with the work has the rank and rights of a new production," Gadamer dismisses such an approach as "an untenable hermeneutic nihilism" (95). He maintains a faith in the truth of the work of art while simultaneously appreciating its historicity, nonetheless acknowledging that reconstructing the historical moment of the production of a text can only aid us so far in our interpretive task. Gadamer comes down forcefully against a historicism that "despite its critique of rationalism and of natural law philosophy, is based upon the modern Enlightenment and unwittingly shares its prejudices. And there is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power" (270). Skeptical of method itself, Gadamer holds that interpretation is "to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated" (290). For Gadamer, interpretation engages in "the play between the traditionary text's strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanciated object and belonging to tradition. The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between" (295). Thus we find ourselves again in the space of the in-between and the both/and. Though less influential to my thought than Gadamer, another hermeneutic scholar's remarks on the limits to interpretation inform this project. The eighteenth-century theologian Johann Martin Chladenius remarks in his *Introduction to the Correct Interpretation of Reasonable Discourses*

and Writings that "werden alle Bücher der Menschen, und ihre Reden, etwas unverständliches an sich haben" (88).[8] It is this challenge to utter comprehensibility that this dissertation wishes to explore. This project expresses my fascination with those spaces where an ostensibly ethnographic and empirical literary project confronts, playfully, its own limits and the limits of its readers' knowledges.

Definitions, Translations, Mappings, and Misreadings

I divide this dissertation into four categories, four interpretive difficulties that arise out of reader response to local color literature: definitions, translations, mappings, and misreadings.

Definitions: St. Thomas Aquinas begins his commentary on Aristotle's *On Interpretation* with a lengthy discussion of "how" words mean. Such a move demonstrates the basic hermeneutic acknowledgment that interpretation requires one to come to an initial conclusion over what individual words within a sentence *mean*. The first chapter, "Stones and Honey: History, Romance, and Truth in the Writings of Charles Gayarré and George Washington Cable," follows a series of conflicts between two New Orleans men of letters grappling with the distinction between definitions of heady concepts like history and romance, truth and fiction – grappling that begins with an initial argument over the definitive meaning of the specific word *Creole*. Often this conflict (the so-called Creole Controversy) is treated by critics as a clash between competing racial politics, and this is certainly true. However, my analysis approaches Gayarré and Cable less as two partisans of particular nineteenth-century political ideologies than as two fellow local colorists, each contending with the boundaries between historical fact and historical romance. Though their political aims differ – one might even read Gayarré's *Fernando de Lemos: Truth and Fiction* as a kind of anti-*Old Creole Days* – both local colorists enact a

[8] "All the books of men, and their speeches, will have within them something incomprehensible."

playful approach to both the historical certainties and the subjective delights that exist in New Orleans. This chapter sets up a critical move that will recur throughout this project: an initial acknowledgment of the values of historicist approaches to regionalism followed by an explanation of what these historicist approaches might ignore about the hermeneutic playfulness of local color as art and local colorists as literary artists.

Translations: Dante Alighieri, no stranger to conversations over language's relation to geography, depicts himself and his guide Virgil descending into the ninth circle of Hell in the *Inferno* past the giant Nimrod, who cries out the linguistically impenetrable phrase: "Raphèl mai amècche zabì almi" (XXXI.67). Virgil, always ready to offer a gloss upon the metaphysical landscapes he and Dante traverse, notes that it would be of no use to try to translate or communicate with Nimrod, who speaks the primordial tongue used before the divine division of languages at the Tower of Babel. The interpreter must admit his inadequacy to render Nimrod's language intelligible even as Nimrod himself remains infernally trapped via his inability to express himself to others, since "for even such to him is every language / As his to others, which to none is known" (XXXI.80-81). The second chapter of this dissertation, "Untranslated Passages: Lafcadio Hearn, New Orleans Guidebooks, and the Creole Sublime," explores moments in local texts when readers – just like Dante and Virgil – come up against the limits of translation. It examines how the withholding of English translations in local color literature emphasizes these texts' preoccupation with the extent to which outsiders can interpret unfamiliar spaces as well as the metaphysical sense of limitations humans encounter in their experiences with the sublime, the mysterious, and the numinous. As such this chapter contributes to this dissertation's curiosity about the blending of ethnographic specificity and romantic ambiguity. Through an analysis of Hearn's novella *Chita* (1888), this chapter argues that the text's playful

approach to the inexpressible and untranslatable exemplifies local color's simultaneous impulses toward familiarization and de-familiarization. This chapter also considers how regionalist aesthetic approaches to rendering spaces strategically illegible informed New Orleans guidebook culture insofar as many of these guidebooks, perhaps counterintuitively, encouraged visitors to the city to take delight in its cultural and geographical mysteries.

Mappings: Franco Moretti calls our attention to the uses of mapping as a method for literary study, and it is no coincidence, given regionalism's focus on accurate depiction of geographical setting, that he utilizes a regionalist text (Mary Mitford's *Our Village*) as a case study in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*. Yet, as Moretti himself acknowledges, maps do not speak for themselves but require interpretation. This chapter examines to what extent historicist mappings of the racial geographies of nineteenth-century New Orleans can illuminate aspects of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *The Goodness of St. Rocque* (1899) given the radical geographic specificity of the collection. In keeping with this project's focus on the playfulness and delight in subjectivity present in local color literature, I argue that Dunbar-Nelson's short stories, for all their painstaking attention to street names and neighborhood distinctions, present us with characters whose racial identities remain ambiguous. This ambiguity functions as a fascinating facet of the text in light of its publication during the era of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. In this chapter, I undertake a mapping of the movements of Dunbar-Nelson's characters through a reconstructed racial geography of nineteenth-century New Orleans in order to see what new information can be uncovered about racial identity in *The Goodness of St. Rocque.* In doing so, however, I argue simultaneously that we must remain open to the romantic elements of Dunbar-Nelson's work as well and that the crucial contribution of her short story collection stems less from its attempt to recreate a literary geography of New Orleans neighborhoods and more from its whimsical

blending of two aesthetic impulses: one that seeks to nail down the fixed, observable, and verifiable "facts" of the city and the other that accentuates ambiguity and fluidity.

Misreadings: I tread carefully in discussing the fourth interpretive dilemma this dissertation grapples with – that of misreading. Misreading is a fraught term, for unlike definitions, translations, or mappings, it carries an accusatory connotation. Yet I wish to cage this term and tame it for the sake of this final section in which I focus specifically on misreading of genre, a misidentification of what kind of text one has before oneself. If one misreads at this level, this misreading opens up the possibility for confusing and confounding the types of truth-claims made by differing textual genres. Though local color – as seen through an appreciation of the works of Chopin, Cable, Hearn, and Dunbar-Nelson – playfully fuses historical fact and historical romance, we find in initial readers' receptions of Felix Voorhies's novella *Acadian Reminiscences, with the True Story of Evangeline* (1907) a desire to limit the text to the status of historical fact. This desire ultimately spins out into bizarre cultural production, including the establishment of a grave purporting to hold the corpse of the "real" counterpart to Longfellow's Evangeline, Emmeline Labiche (herself a fictional character). This chapter demonstrates what occurs when local color fails to be read and interpreted as such and what happens when an author and a readership alike resist the local color approach to an aesthetic mode that embraces elements of both myth and history, both romance and realism. It also illustrates the real-world consequences of conflating claims of empirical truth with those of aesthetic truth.

Limits: Finally, I close with a brief coda that approaches the concept of limits, so often acknowledged in this project as necessary elements of existence in the world, from another angle. Limits, as I have argued, define *loci* as spaces of shared meanings and knowledges. Methodological limits foster epistemological humility on the part of scholars. Yet it would be

naïve to ignore the fact that limits *can* oppress and burden and that, at times, we must redefine and rework them. This coda offers closing musings on local color literature's treatment of limits via a close reading of Kate Chopin's "Beyond the Bayou" from *Bayou Folk* (1894) and an appreciation of how *caritas* at times can propel characters in local color literature to contest those limits that confine and isolate rather than grant order and structure. In doing so, it intends to close this project on a humanistic note, acknowledging that grappling with the mystery of the other brings us up against our personal limits but also spurs us to renegotiate those limits.

CHAPTER ONE – [DEFINITIONS]
Stones and Honey: History, Romance, and Truth in the Writings of Charles Gayarré and George Washington Cable

> When history is not disfigured by inappropriate invention, but merely embellished and made attractive by being set in a glittering frame, this artful preparation honies the cup of useful knowledge and makes it acceptable to the lips of the multitude.
>
> Charles Gayarré, Preface to *Romance of the History of Louisiana* (1848)

> True stories are not often good art. The relations and experiences of real men and women rarely fall in such symmetrical order as to make an artistic whole. Until they have had such treatment as we give stones in the quarry or gems in the rough they seldom group themselves with that harmony of values and brilliant unity of interest that results when art comes in.
>
> George Washington Cable, *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* (1889)

> The trouble with George is he cannot stick to the truth in anything. He is by nature a thin-voiced romancer.
>
> Review, *New Orleans Times-Democrat* (7 September 1885)

Joseph Frowenfeld, the oft-befuddled yet ever-cheerful protagonist of George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880), keeps up a careful documentation of New Orleans. Granted, Frowenfeld initially seems unable to grasp the nuances of the city's racial structures, the French language of its inhabitants, or the complex interrelationships between his friends and associates there. Yet with regularity and precision each morning, the Philadelphia-born newcomer to New Orleans records the readings on his thermometer, hygrometer, and barometer, noting the weather outside of his apothecary shop. Agricola Fusilier, the leonine Creole patriarch, offers to publish Frowenfeld's notebook (in French, of course) and encourages him to expand his rather dry tables of numbers with "valuable geographical, topographical, biographical, and historical notes" along with tracts on politics penned by none other than Agricola himself (139). Though the young apothecary never takes Agricola up on his offer to write the book that would render a comprehensive account of Louisiana, this trope of the state as a book to be interpreted by the outsider Frowenfeld recurs throughout the novel. Puzzling over

the attempted murder of Agricola Fusilier, the existence of two Honoré Grandissimes, and the city's tangle of family lineages and loyalties, Frowenfeld decides to augment his study of scholarly books with a renewed study of the book of the world:

> Resolved, in other words, without ceasing to be Frowenfeld the studious, to begin at once the perusal of this newly-found book, the Community of New Orleans. True, he knew he should find it a difficult task – not only that much of it was in a strange tongue, but that it was a volume whose displaced leaves would have to be lifted tenderly, blown free of much dust, re-arranged, some torn fragments laid together again with much painstaking, and even the purport of some of the pages guessed out. (103)

Critics have often looked to Frowenfeld as a proxy figure for the reader of *The Grandissimes*, a fellow interpreter attempting to apprehend the context surrounding the narrative, the threads of the narrative itself, and even the indeterminate language through which details about the characters and their motivations are filtered. Cable's own whimsical narrative style forefronts the difficulties of interpretation and places the reader in similar hermeneutic predicaments as those in which Cable places his protagonist. Yet it is not only the narrative tone which forefronts these difficulties. At times Cable's authorial decisions actually *create* these difficulties, as he leaves his readers to grapple with untranslated localized French dialects and withholds from them details necessary to make out basic narrative cause-and-effect. All of this impenetrability creates in the reader a sense of hermeneutic uneasiness, a sense that one is always in danger of misreading the text. The chief features of the narrative voice of the novel – its playfulness, its caginess about truth claims, and its winking acknowledgment that it is not giving the reader full access to information known by locals – only serve to further exacerbate this sense of unease. Even the final line of the novel, Aurora Nancanou's response to Honoré's offer of marriage, concludes the book with an utterance that conveys its opposite, though by this point we know enough about the characteristically coy Aurora (and the interpretative logic of the novel itself) to read her "No!" as an acceptance of Honoré's proposal (339).

Such linguistic mischievousness constitutes part of the aesthetic project of *The Grandissimes* not only to point out the unstable nature of language itself but also to remind us that we as readers, like Frowenfeld, must operate within a space where our knowledge is limited, where distinctions are ambiguous, and where even the histories before us must be pieced together under a constant awareness of the potential for misapprehension or misreading. This dissertation as a whole, but particularly this first chapter, requires the initial acknowledgment that this unstable hermeneutic position of the reader is crucial to our understanding of local color as a literary mode that operates at the crossroads of nineteenth-century literary realism and literary romanticism. This space of intersection is a particularly treacherous one for misreadings and accusations of misreadings due to realism and romanticism's variant modes of communicating knowledge about the world via art and their distinct approaches to defining what constitutes truth or truthfulness in literature.

Though *The Grandissimes* continually highlights the difficulties of reading "the book of the Community of New Orleans," its reception by nineteenth-century readers as part of a larger body of local color literature speaks to the way the text blends, to borrow from William Dean Howells's appraisal of the novel, "romance and reality" (240). While many of Cable's contemporaries lauded *The Grandissimes* for its aesthetic polish, critics simultaneously praised his novel for what they considered its accurate, realistic rendering of New Orleans and the local knowledges that circulated within the city. Initial critics especially applauded the novel's supposed fidelity to the cultural and linguistic realities of New Orleans. The September 27, 1880, issue of the New Orleans *Democrat* published the following glowing review, in which a nod to the romantic artistry of the novel becomes subsumed beneath acclaim for its alleged ethnographical accuracy:

> The creations of this novelist are in reality *not* creations. They were and are living, breathing men and women, transferred from actual life to his pages, made immortal by their repeating everyday speech and manners, and the tinge of genius thrown into every character. (qtd. in Turner 101)

Praise for the novel was not universal, but even those nineteenth-century critics who expressed reservations about *The Grandissimes* nonetheless located their critiques on a spectrum between interpretations of the novel as literary realism or literary romance. This applies to such claims as *Scribner's* editorial assistant Irwin Russell's critique after seeing draft versions of *The Grandissimes* that Cable, a bad realist, gets the facts wrong in terms of dialect or poet-priest Adrien Rouquette's attacks on Cable as a mawkish romanticist ("this Cablishissime romanticist") who should have availed himself of the more "rigorously" true artistic mode of realism (Turner 96; Rouquette 11).

The most famous critical disputes over the realism not only of *The Grandissimes* but also of Cable's earlier short story collection *Old Creole Days* (1879) arose from white New Orleanians' accusations that Cable had inaccurately represented racial matters in their community. These white Creoles objected most vociferously to what they viewed as Cable's implication that Creoles commonly mixed socially and sexually across the color line and that this mixing dated back to the French and Spanish colonial eras of the eighteenth century. Chief among these defenders of white Creole racial purity was the historian, novelist, and playwright Charles Étienne Arthur Gayarré, a figure who has received critical attention primarily for his opposition to Cable's work and his repudiation of Cable's ability to represent faithfully the history of Louisiana. This chapter, however, hopes to reposition Gayarré as a literary figure in his own right and to demonstrate how his literary output, much like Cable's, engages with the ambiguous space between realism and romanticism. The debate that arose between Gayarré and Cable – the debate over how to correctly write and read the book of Louisiana – strikes upon a

key element of this study of interpreting local color literature insofar as it examines how authors and readers clashed over what constituted truthful representations of a particular *locus.*

Placing the literary-historical disagreements between Gayarré and Cable within the context of this dissertation as a whole illuminates crucial and often unacknowledged aspects of their so-called "Creole controversy." First, the controversy arose out of questions regarding who holds or claims to hold the authority to dispense local knowledge as an insider. The controversy sought not only to define what constituted local knowledge about New Orleans but also who among the city's locals could most accurately communicate these knowledges. Second, the Gayarré-Cable dispute sheds light on the conflict between two alternate readings of local color literature – one, arising out of a tradition of literary realism, that views the text as a project in painstakingly accurate ethnography, and the other, arising out of a tradition of literary romanticism, that might allow for ambiguity, impenetrability, and playfulness with truth claims. Contained within this second point is a dilemma for readers regarding how they should distinguish between these two kinds of local color – how they should differentiate between those details included in regionalist texts as attempts at accurate representation of regional folkways and histories and those details which stem from romantic literary embellishment. However, out of this confusion can arise a revelation for us as critics about local color's capability as a literary mode to "do" both realism and romanticism simultaneously. As such, it can potentially operate as a meeting-space for what are often seen as differing forms of approaching representations of the world in art. Local color can function as a creole space where objective fact can accommodate subjective experience and where positivism and empiricism do not automatically preclude an awareness of the ineffable, the mysterious, and the numinous.

This chapter argues that the literary output of these two Louisiana authors – Charles

Gayarré and George Washington Cable – exists in a state of tension between the conventions of romance (with its attendant models of romantic truth) and the expectations of accuracy attached to both realism as a literary genre and nineteenth-century positivist theories of historiography. What makes Gayarré and Cable prime candidates for such an analysis is the fact that their texts so often operate in border spaces between history and literature. For instance, Gayarré's massive multi-volume *Louisiana, Its Colonial History and Romance* buttresses its own factual accuracy while simultaneously articulating an argument for the usefulness of "romantic truth" in writing history. Likewise Gayarré's novel *Fernando de Lemos: Truth and Fiction* (1872) and Cable's *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* (1889) shuttle back and forth between the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction and between the genres of historical romance and realism, demonstrating for us the fluid boundaries between not only literary categories but categories of human thought.

The first part of this chapter will sketch out Gayarré and Cable's hermeneutic horizons. Framed by Hans-Georg Gadamer's theories on interpretative horizons as articulated in *Truth and Method (Warheit und Methode)*, this section will delineate Gayarré and Cable's biographical and intellectual contexts and argue that much of the authors' divergence on what constituted local knowledge of New Orleans arose from where they mapped Louisiana within a broader cultural and historical geography – that is, within which *locus* they chose to place the city and the state. Fascinatingly enough, while both men positioned Louisiana within a global horizon of significance, their conflicting commitments regarding the liberal individual subject created two very different global Louisianas, one bound within the hierarchies of the conservative, aristocratic ethos of pre-revolutionary Europe and the other mapped within the framework of a call for a global progressivist ethics that would begin on the local level. To recognize both Gayarré and Cable as global in their outlooks pushes back against a reductive approach to the

"global South" that would mark conservatism as inherently provincial and localist while holding that progressivism by its nature must operate from a globalist perspective. In short, to recognize the hermeneutic horizons of Gayarré and Cable is to recognize, despite the direct opposition of their truth-claims about Creole New Orleans, the similarity of their rhetorical moves in interconnecting the global and the local.

The second part of this chapter will offer a critical reappraisal of the Creole controversy, the famous war of words in which Gayarré and other white Creoles took Cable to task for allegedly misrepresenting the definition of the term *Creole* in his fiction and non-fiction. Because of the white Creole racial anxieties that fueled this dispute, critics have long approached the matter as a debate over race. Virginia Domínguez's *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* and the thoroughly-documented essays collected in Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph R. Logsdon's *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* both utilize this approach with incredibly valuable results. Building from these studies but also diverging from them, this section of Chapter One will re-read the controversy as a disagreement not only over racial definition (as previous critics have already pointed out) but also over who could speak authoritatively to a national readership on the subject of local knowledge. Such a reassessment in no way intends to diminish the critical race questions at work in the controversy. This argument does intend, however, to frame these racial classifications as forms of local knowledge that could be potentially misread by outsiders, much to the chagrin of certain white New Orleanians.

In keeping with this chapter's interest in approaching comparative readings of Gayarré and Cable from a fresh angle, the final section of Chapter One will unsettle typical critical conversations that approach the dispute between Gayarré and Cable as one between a historian (Gayarré) and a fiction writer who dabbled in history (Cable). By approaching Gayarré through

an analysis of his autobiographical novel *Fernando de Lemos: Truth and Fiction*, this section frames him as a fellow local colorist working in the same literary mode as Cable. This consideration of *Fernando de Lemos* alongside Cable's *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* illuminates how both authors situated themselves in relation to the kinds of truth they purported to depict and demonstrates how the strangeness of these texts results from their position – like so much of local color – between the competing conventions of literary romanticism and literary realism. Of import to this entire chapter, but particularly to this third section, is my attempt to break Gayarré out of his standard position in critical studies as simply the reactionary villain, the arch-conservative foil to Cable's noble racial progressivism. Rather, this chapter illustrates more fruitful ways of reading Gayarré, acknowledging, of course, his distasteful racial politics but nevertheless focusing on the work he did as a Louisiana local colorist. As Coleman Hutchinson has pointed out in *Apples and Ashes: Literature, Nationalism, and the Confederate States of America*, ignoring the literary output of the historical "bad guys" constitutes a kind of critical dishonesty. Hutchinson also argues that it is equally dishonest to treat the ideological stances of history's "villains" as lacking in intellectual complexity (3). Though Cable scholarship has often attended exlusively to Gayarré's historical corpus, this chapter seeks to open new avenues of approaching the Gayarré-Cable dispute by intentionally focusing on Gayarré's literary fiction, fiction linked to Cable's not only by shared rhetorical strategies but also by its attempts to wrestle with complex questions of what constitutes truthfulness in the context of literary expression.

Old and New Worlds: Hermeneutic Horizons and the Mapping of a Global Louisiana

Since so much of the controversy surrounding Cable's depiction of New Orleans hinged upon concerns about the interpretation of his texts by a national readership as well as local

doubts regarding Cable's own interpretation of Louisiana history, it may be useful to articulate the working theoretical model of interpretation under which this chapter operates. Hans-Georg Gadamer claims in *Truth and Method* that the work of interpretation is not

> to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place. But these conditions are not of the nature of a ‘procedure' or method, which the interpreter must of himself bring to bear on the text, but rather they must be given. The prejudices and fore-meanings of the mind of the interpreter are not at his free disposal. He is not able to separate in advance the productive prejudices that make understanding possible from the prejudices that hinder understanding and lead to misunderstandings. (263)

In short, this chapter will follow Gadamer insofar as it seeks not to answer the question of what a nineteenth-century author or reader should have done to "correctly" write or interpret local color literature. Rather, this chapter approaches interpretation as a function of applying an individual's set of pre-existing contextual frameworks to an object under observation – with an awareness that these frameworks may either facilitate or block one's access to the truth of that object. As Gadamer warns, it is no simple task to separate those pre-existing horizons which lead one towards fuller understanding of an object from those which lead one astray. Yet undergirding this warning is a resistance to the kind of relativism that would shrug off competing claims about Louisiana history or the community of New Orleans as simply Gayarré or Cable each expressing "their own truths." Gadamer's argument goes beyond the common sense assertion that individuals interpret reality within a particular historical or ideological framework. Rather, Gadamer's concept of the hermeneutic horizon challenges such a static, rigid view of context by arguing that interpretation requires a fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) between an individual's own interpretative horizon and that of the text or the other with which or with whom they engage. In this fusion, the pre-existing frameworks of understanding are not limits but participants in the process of interpretation. "A person," writes Gadamer, "who has no horizon

does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, ‘to have a horizon' means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it" (313). This first section of Chapter One "clarifies the conditions" under which Gayarré and Cable approached Louisiana and demonstrates how their hermeneutic horizons (while both global in scope) mapped the state and its history within competing systems of meaning. Yet, following Gadamer, this chapter will not view Gayarré and Cable's pre-existing frameworks of understanding as impediments to reaching objective truth but rather as frameworks that participate in a creative process of interpretation of the history and the culture of their region.

Neither Gayarré nor Cable's horizon is radically localized. That is, both look beyond the immediate material realities of postbellum Louisiana. Both intend their horizons to be transhistorical and global, linking the state to broader networks of significance. Yet their fundamental disagreement over the ethos that should govern this global structure prevents them from ever actively engaging with one another's argumentative terms. Thus they fail to dialectically fuse their respective horizons in the positive manner Gadamer's hermeneutic theory imagines. This section pulls from a variety of texts written over the course of Gayarré and Cable's lifetimes to chart their articulations of two distinct global Louisianas. A survey of Gayarré's historical writings, his play *The School for Politics*, and his heavily-autobiographical novel *Fernando de Lemos* will demonstrate how Gayarré operates from an intellectual space that is deeply skeptical of philosophical materialism, of the Enlightenment, and of the project of liberalism itself. He praises models of communal affiliation that rely upon hierarchical structures and a conception of the individual as bound by unchosen duties (what Michael Sandel in *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* has called "encumbered selfhood" in contrast to Enlightenment liberalism's "unencumbered self"). The flourishing of

Louisiana for Gayarré is contingent upon how well or poorly its communities adhere to these conservative values. Gayarré charts such virtues on a global scale, locating their origins in the aristocratic ethos of the Old World and the mores and norms of those pre-revolutionary European powers who once colonized Louisiana. Cable likewise places Louisiana within a global network, though his future-oriented globalism serves as the progressive foil to Gayarré's traditionalist order. As Katharine Burnett has recently argued in "Moving Toward a 'No South' : George Washington Cable's Global Vision in *The Grandissimes*," Cable frames his historically-specific call for civil rights in the postbellum South within the larger context of a global, universal call for human rights (29). This section of Chapter One attends to how Cable works out these progressivist commitments not only in fiction like *The Grandissimes* but in his later political writings such as "The Silent South."

To begin sketching out Gayarré's hermeneutic horizons, it is fitting to acknowledge his familial roots in Louisiana – a move Gayarré himself would have, I imagine, appreciated. Tracing Gayarré's ancestry back to the era of Spanish colonization (1762-1802), we find a paternal ancestor serving as an *intendant* (a royally-appointed, chief economic administrator) under Louisiana's first Spanish governor Antonio de Ulloa (Powell, *Accidental City* 141-2). On the French side, Gayarré's maternal grandfather Étienne de Boré achieved renown for turning out the first profitable sugarcane crop in Louisiana, a colony which up until that point had been struggling to produce tobacco to compete with English Virginia. Following American acquisition of the city, de Boré served as the first mayor of New Orleans (Fertel 15). Gayarré would later rely on these colonial ancestors to assert his "pure" Creole heritage against Cable, whom he dismissed in a *Times-Democrat* review of Cable's "The Freedman's Case in Equity" as being "born in Louisiana of Northern parents" (8). Though he attacked Cable's ancestry as

insufficiently Louisianan, Gayarré knew that his own celebrated sugar-farming grandfather de Boré had himself come to New Orleans from the North, from the tiny village of Kaskaskia in present-day southern Illinois (Fertel 15). Taking a generous perspective, one could claim that Gayarré's grandfather had lived in Illinois during its time as part of a colonial Louisiana whose territory expanded across North America and therefore Gayarré may not have considered de Boré a native of the monolithic North (as an imagined antagonist against a monolithic South). Rather, for Gayarré, we can imagine Louisiana's borders potentially expanding to incorporate other parts of American geography so long as those geographies could be articulated through the context of the era of royally-sanctioned exploration and conquest by France and Spain.

At the time Gayarré was born in 1805 (thirty-nine years before Cable), memories of that colonial era remained fresh. In 1803, only two years before his birth, the Louisiana Purchase had been completed, and the United States had accepted the city from France with much pomp and circumstance in the Place d'Armes, though residents reportedly wept (with sorrow, not joy) upon seeing the American flag raised for the first time. Lawrence N. Powell in *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* notes the historical irony that "New Orleans became even more French after the Purchase than it had been before" (320). Pushing back against perceived Anglo-American encroachment, Creole New Orleanians sought to reassert their ethnic distinctiveness. Such was the cultural milieu that shaped the young Gayarré. His education at the College of Orleans connected him not only to a Franco-American network of historical, geographical, and cultural associations but to a wider, international Francophone community. Several teachers at the school belonged to the group of "foreign French" (*français étrangers* or *français de dehors*), refugees from slave revolutions in the Caribbean and revolutionary turmoil in France herself (Lachance 102). Among these instructors fleeing an adverse political climate was Joseph

Lackanal, a priest-turned-Jacobin who had joined Robespierre and the radical wing of the French Assembly in calling for the execution of King Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette (Hunt 57). Gayarré would later, in *Fernando de Lemos*, demonize Lackanal (spelled Lakanal in the novel) as an example of what horrors could be unleashed when individuals committed to Enlightenment liberalism destabilized older aristocratic structures. So while the flag of the United States (and briefly that of the Confederate States) always flew over Gayarré's New Orleans, his family history and educational background both encouraged his mapping of Louisiana within the cultural geography of Old World Europe and its religious and political commitments.

Gayarré's early work as a writer maintained this Old World strain and helped foster a continued French print culture within American New Orleans. Following legal studies in Pennsylvania, Gayarré returned south in 1830 and that same year published *Essai historique sur la Louisiane*, a translated adaptation of Judge Francis-Xavier Martin's English-language *History of Louisiana: From the Earliest Period,* itself mostly quotation from earlier sources (Fertel 17). (Incidentally, this Judge Martin, who went on to become chief justice of the state supreme court, figures prominently in both Gayarré's *Fernando de Lemos* and Cable's *Strange True Stories of Louisiana*.) While committed to his Francophone literary output, Gayarré also achieved stunningly rapid political success within the state's American government, holding the following positions in the course of only five years: state representative, deputy state attorney general, New Orleans city court judge, and, ultimately, U.S. senator from Louisiana.

Yet, as he would articulate in his 1854 play *The School for Politics* (a play he termed "a dramatic novel"), the equalizing tendencies encouraged by Jacksonian democracy did not mesh well with Gayarré's leanings towards Old World *noblesse*. In a darkly-comic scene from the play, the representative Lovedale counsels the senator Randolph on how to achieve success in a

democracy by forgoing the pursuit of excellence and virtue. Rather, Lovedale argues, one should affect a public persona of coarseness and vulgarity to ingratiate oneself with the common people:

> I would further say to you: shake hands with every low fellow you meet – the dirtier the better; dress shabbily – affect vulgarity – learn to swear as big and as loud as possible – tap every man affectionately on the shoulder – get drunk once a week . . . spout against tyrants, aristocrats, and the rich – above all, talk eternally of the poor oppressed people and their rights – drop entirely the garb, the manners, and the feelings of a gentleman. (120)

Here Gayarré lambasts Jacksonian democracy and its focus on the "common man" as a system which drags down the body politic rather than promoting the flourishing of the republic. As depicted by Gayarré, the lower orders of society exert their power by pressuring men of character to lower themselves to the level of the uncouth mob. Even though Lovedale's advice to Randolph amounts to dissimulation (Randolph is asked to drop the outward show of gentlemanliness), one can divine in these lines Gayarré's own critique of politicians who feel the need to take the side of the unwashed *demos*. A similarly dismissive approach towards individual rights and democracy appears in *Fernando de Lemos* when the title character passes a bootblack named Sam Slick haranguing a crowd of fellow children who gleefully acclaim the prospect of Slick as eventual president of the United States (482). Far from presenting Slick as a scrappy-yet-lovable street urchin – a kind of New Orleanian answer to Dickens's Oliver Twist, Hugo's Gavroche, or Alger's Ragged Dick – the novel frames Slick's presidential ambitions as a grave danger to the republic and, in fact, emphasizes that such ambitions constitute a major flaw in the American system of government.

Much of Gayarré's unease with the American *demos* stems from how he connects the "common crowds" of his birth country to those revolutionary insurgents who unseated the old order of eighteenth-century Europe. When, in *Fernando de Lemos*, Fernando's friend the graveyard sexton Tintin Calandro (himself a refugee from the French Revolution) hears the cries

of passing political ralliers on a New Orleans street, he experiences a traumatic flashback to the moment he watched the violent mobs of Paris carry the head of his beloved Princess de Lamballe past him on a pike (337). In such scenes, Gayarré links democracy in America to the dark excesses of European revolutions. Thus, universal human rights and democratic leveling became for him deeply troubling prospects. In one of the more surreal passages of *Fernando de Lemos*, a passage that follows Tintin's traumatic remembrance of the murder of the Princess de Lamballe, Fernando's sleep is troubled by a nightmare he recounts as follows:

> At one time, for instance, I fancied that the overseer of my plantation had turned out to be Robespierre in person, whom, to my horror, I surprised boiling a negro in one of my sugar kettles in the name of equality, liberty, and universal fraternity. (338)

The burning of the slave in a sugar kettle by the overseer (Fernando's social inferior) bizarrely displaces the violence of chattel slavery and connects it not with the oppressive systems perpetuated by antebellum slaveholders but rather with Enlightenment liberalism's call for *liberté, égalité, et fraternité.*

Perhaps unable to reconcile his own aristocratic commitments with the demands of the American political scene or perhaps owing to a severe bout of the depression that would recur periodically through his life, Gayarré resigned as a senator soon after taking office and departed from the United States for France. At this point, as Rien Fertel notes in *Imagining the Creole City: The Rise of Literary Culture in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans,* Gayarré's biography becomes difficult to follow, as no known records of his time in Europe exist in the form of personal journals or letters. Fertel does suggest, though, that "If we may read *Fernando de Lemos* as a sort of travelogue, then we know he [Gayarré] meandered through France and Spain, spending most of his time in the French capital" (23). Following Fertel's suggestion to read the novel as at least partially autobiographical, one can piece together more evidence of Gayarré's

conservative globalist vision.

It is no coincidence that Fernando spends most of his European travels in Spain and France – the two former colonial powers that had ruled New Orleans. In the Pyrenees, Fernando marvels at a world governed by ritual order, liturgical time, and regional customs which reach back generations. While climbing through the mountains, Fernando describes how

> I descried at the bottom of the valley a small village of about one hundred houses. The spire of a modest church loomed up in the distance, and its chimes, which the evening breeze brought to our ears, announced to us the angelus, or the salutation to Mary, which in Catholic countries is repeated three times a day. (107)

Within this idyllic landscape, Fernando finds a population committed to stability rather than the progressivist change that so unsettled Gayarré in the United States. The priest Father Hubert represents the ideal image of this kind of stability, expressing deep disinterest in the controversial theological topics Fernando tries to discuss with him. Of what use is squabbling over such trifles when one's view of time extends infinitely further than the latest crisis or most recent expression of public outrage? Yet Fernando does find other regional Spaniards engaged in nineteenth-century politics in their resistance to the threat of the new order of the nation-state. He finds them unnerved at having to give up their deeply localized identities in the face of modernity:

> The idea that a Navarrese, a Basque, or an Aragonese, was to lose his particular autonomy, and possess only the name and rights common to all Spaniards, without retaining his time-honored local privileges, exemptions, or liberties, his hereditary immunities, customs and prejudices and his cherished distinctions of race and nationality, could not be tolerated by those proud mountaineers. (126)

Here in *Fernando de Lemos* we find rural Spaniards facing similar anxieties as the Creoles of New Orleans in Cable's *Old Creole Days* and *The Grandissimes*, pressured to forgo custom and tradition in the face of the modern nation-state. While Cable finds these anxieties useful material for light, tragicomic mockery, Gayarré approaches these anxieties through the lens of a broader

historical defeatism that viewed the present as homogenizing and disenchanting a previously colorful, diverse world.

At the urban salons of Bourbon Restorationists, Fernando (and implicitly Gayarré) nods along with the old aristocrats of Europe as they bemoan the dangers of republicanism and wax nostalgic for conservative order. One royalist confides in Fernando, "Our plan is to gorge France with the sweetmeats of a republic… until she vomits the poisonous substance on which she shall have feasted" (65). For this royalist, "It is evident that institutions which lasted a thousand years, had in them something better than can be offered by those which spring up like mushrooms from the rank soil of revolution, and which perish as rapidly. Duration is the test of the goodness and fitness of human institution" (65-66). It is crucial that we understand Gayarré's later rhetorical moves during the Creole controversy as emerging from his royalist, anti-democratic, and pro-aristocratic impulses as well as from his opinions on race in America. Gayarré's conservatism relies on a much more complex foundation than mere racism, and – as will be seen in the third section of this chapter – also relies upon a sense of the Old World as a space of enchantment and delight in contrast to the materialism and utilitarianism of nineteenth-century America.

After nearly a decade abroad, Gayarré re-established himself in New Orleans in 1844 and yet again achieved success in both literature and politics, serving as secretary of state during the administration of Governor Isaac Johnson and publishing (in French) his *Histoire de la Louisiane* in 1846 (Fertel 24). The success of this history encouraged Gayarré to reach out to larger audiences by delivering lectures in English on the region's history and by publishing collections of these lectures through major publishing houses in New York such as Harper and Brothers. The first series appeared as *Romance of the History of Louisiana* (1848) but was released with additions only a few years later as *Louisiana, Its Colonial History and Romance*

(1851). The histories reinforce Gayarré's preoccupation with framing Louisiana within a global geography. In these lectures Gayarré imagines the associative horizons of Louisiana extending even further back in time and space than Old World Europe, linking the heroines and heroes of Louisiana history to models from classical antiquity to give a neoclassical sheen to his narrative. For instance, Gayarré imagines the canoes of early Mississippi River explorers Joliet and Père Marquette setting forth from Mackinac, Michigan, for an enterprise as great as that of "the famed vessel of Argos, sailing in quest of the Golden Fleece" (28). Louis XIV, as he receives La Salle at a court celebration of the claiming of Louisiana for France, is figured as "a Jupiter among the kings of the earth" (33). As Iberville skirmishes with British naval forces in a sea-battle, Gayarré compares the flags and banners of the enemy's ships to the "Gorgon's disheveled locks" (38). For Gayarré, these nods back to classical antiquity and to Old World aristocracy are not mere literary flourishes but signify a real social and political critique, an attempt to defend the excellence and glory of a high-minded past against the banality of the present. Cable, on the other hand, plays such Creole gesturing for hyperbolic laughs with characters in *The Grandissimes* who carry names such as Agamemnon Brahmin de Grandissime and Epaminondas Fusilier, using these classical references for the opposite critique – that the fatal flaw of the older order stemmed from its hierarchical posturing and its inflexibility in the face of change.[9]

Cable's own hermeneutic horizon lacks the European referents of Gayarré's, though Cable nonetheless articulates a global vision – relying not on historical, familial, or specific cultural

[9] Cable's mockery may have been based on historical realities here. Lawrence N. Powell notes in *The Accidental City* that settlers in New Orleans during the early French colonial era frequently added noble-sounding *particules* to their names to ascend a few rungs higher on the social ladder: "The status contagion infected all kinds of public officeholders, who not infrequently tacked on the name of some inconsequential burg in remotest France" (107). Not unique to Louisiana, the practice existed earlier in French Canada. Bienville's father "made a practice of assigning his sons titles named for localities near his native village back in France – de Longueuil, de Sérigny, de Châteaugué, and so on, recycling those titles to a younger son when the elder one died" (21).

foundations but rather by appealing to a politics aimed at the achievement of universal human rights. Such an avenue, blocked to Gayarré given his skepticism of the political projects of Enlightenment liberalism, remains open to the more progressive Cable. Born in New Orleans's Faubourg de l'Annunciation the same year that Gayarré returned from his European sojourn, Cable was raised by parents who had married in Indiana but had since moved to Louisiana (Turner 4). Though the family had no significant literary pedigree, George Washington Cable, *père*, was known to write letters to his wife Rebecca in doggerel verse, and as a child the future author of *The Grandissimes* was allowed to read from not only the works of Sir Walter Scott but also *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Turner 17; 15). Cable's early years show no particular impulse towards political progressivism. After his hometown had been occupied for a year by Union forces, Cable enlisted in the Confederate Army in the Fourth Mississippi Cavalry in October 1863 (Turner 25-6). Following the war he took work as a surveyor before signing on as a journalist for the *Picayune* newspaper, publishing the first of his local sketches in the column "Drop Shot" in 1870 (Turner 39). It was in "Drop Shot" that Cable cut his teeth depicting local scenes of New Orleans life. "Discovered" by *Scribner's Monthly Magazine* writer Edward King on his tour of the "Great South," Cable quickly received national attention for short stories that would later appear in the collection *Old Creole Days* such as "'Sieur George," "Belles Demoiselles Plantation," and "'Tite Poulette," among others. Primarily set in the early years of Louisiana statehood, these stories dramatize the clashes between the honor codes of New Orleans Creoles and the rising influence of *les Américains*. Along with his major novel *The Grandissimes*, these short stories solidified Cable's reputation on a national level as New Orleans's representative local color author and literary interpreter of Louisiana history.

As Cable biographer Arlin Turner notes, Cable "could not read history without relating it

to the present and seeing in it guides for shaping the future" (38). It has become a critical commonplace in Cable studies to acknowledge how the tension between the Creoles and the newly-arrived Americans in *Old Creole Days* and *The Grandissimes* speak to parallel anxieties in postbellum New Orleans about an aristocratic order's resistance to current economic and cultural realities. Yet we can significantly contrast this tendency on Cable's part to apply historical lessons to the present and future with Gayarré's tendency to approach history not as a space for envisioning the future but as a site of remembered glories and standards. Cable does not reject the glory of the old order outright, though he does hold it up for critique. Indeed, in such pieces of political writing as "The Silent South," Cable utilizes the traditions of the past as part of a progressivist rhetoric looking ever forward.

For Cable in "The Silent South," the statue of Robert E. Lee standing atop its pillar in Tivoli Circle[10] is not used to symbolize an inherently corrupt traditionalism but rather functions as a rhetorical device to contrast political stasis and political action. Though Cable, a former Confederate cavalryman and secretary to none other than Nathan Bedford Forrest, acknowledges the patrician virtues of Lee – "brave, calm, thoughtful, broad-minded, dispassionate, sincere" (43) – he stops short of viewing Lee as an unproblematic culture-hero for the South and imagines the general atop his podium looking not backward towards a lost Southern history but *forward* into the future of the South, a future connected to concerns about universal human rights. Unlike Gayarré, who imagined that the ethos of gentlemanly ability and honor should hold the line regardless of historical context, Cable in "The Silent South" argues for a shift in behavior and

[10] Tivoli Circle is – as of the time this chapter was written – the present-day Lee Circle. Following the shootings at the Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by a white supremacist and the subsequent push to purge the national landscape of iconography related to the Confederacy, calls have been made by Mayor Mitch Landrieu of New Orleans and other local groups to remove the statue of General Lee and rename the circle. Suggestions have been made to revert to the name Tivoli Circle or to rechristen the space Toussaint Circle in honor of the musician and record producer Allen Toussaint.

mores in the face of changing historical circumstances. The statue, so long silent and "dispassionate," must exchange its muteness for speech: "But the times change – have changed. Whatever the merit or fault of earlier reticence, this mute, firm-rooted figure, with sheathed sword and folded arms, must yield a step, not backward, but forward" (43).

This use of the progressivist rhetoric of "moving forward" and the rejection of stasis are hallmarks of not only "The Silent South" but Cable's other political essays and public lectures such as "Literature in the Southern States" and "The Freedman's Case in Equity." In these works Cable unsettles typical conceptions of the local as an inherently conservative space, opting instead to use the local space as a rhetorical staging ground for a leap into discussions of global frameworks of belonging. Cable's close attention to local identification and identity (eg. the Southerner who identifies with the patrician General Lee) as issues for inviting dialogue and not as intellectual structures to be demolished parallels Gadamer's call for the necessity of certain "prejudices and fore-meanings" as prerequisites for interpreting and understanding the world. Katharine Burnett, moving beyond the standard moves of the "global turn" in Southern studies, argues that Cable articulates a global model of empathy radically unbounded by national borders but which nevertheless relies upon initial local affiliations. She notes that Cable's framework "connect[s] any country or human being" but simultaneously acknowledges the ways in which Cable accounts for "the multiple particularities of region" (24). In foregrounding Cable's concern for the local-global connection and his appeals to the transcendental essences of the true, the beautiful, and the good, Burnett shirks the standard move made by "global South" critics who often attend strictly to the economic or material realities of international exchange (24). Like Gayarré's appreciation for the local identities of the peasants in the Pyrenees, Cable sees the need for Southerners to retain certain connections to their lived *locus* of experience. Yet, unlike

Gayarré, Cable finds this sense of local identity useful insofar as it bridges transnational boundaries and prods one towards a recognition of ethical obligations to humanity and human rights on a global scale. In response to this, Gayarré critiqued Cable's globalism in similarly globalist terms, arguing that he had with such political claims "launched an attack on all mankind" (Turner 204).

Thus Gayarré and Cable resemble the two faces of Janus. They look across the same plane of vision but in opposite directions, with eyes keyed to divergent sociopolitical concerns. The horizons which shape their mapping and interpretation of Louisiana are similarly global, but the fusing of these horizons becomes quite difficult due to their irreconcilable commitments. This failure to fuse horizons (as will be demonstrated in the following section) led Gayarré and Cable into a literary war-of-words over not only the definition of the term *Creole* but over the proper way to read "the book of the Community of New Orleans." Yet for all their divergence in terms of hermeneutic horizons, Gayarré and Cable nonetheless remain linked in the ways that their literary output approached historical romance and historical truth, as will be demonstrated in the third and final portion of this chapter. During the Creole controversy, however, such similarities were overlooked by Cable's detractors in favor of criticizing his work from both fronts – as a failure of literary realism and as a failure of literary romanticism. The following section serves as a bridge between the three parts of this chapter, demonstrating how the Creole controversy hinges upon both the differing hermeneutic frameworks of Gayarré and Cable (section 1) and complications inherent to local color literature as a mode that operated in the aesthetic intersection of literary realism and literary romanticism (section 3).

Reassessing the Creole Controversy: Local Color and Local Knowledge

Despite the acrimony that arose between them during the Creole controversy, Gayarré and Cable initially enjoyed what appears to have been a cordial professional relationship. Cable himself had, in his final "Drop Shot" column, expressed affection for Gayarré as an historian who had "uncovered the mines of romance" within Louisiana history (n.p.). When Edward King arrived in New Orleans on his scouting mission for local literary talent, he met with Gayarré as well as Cable, and it would not be unfair conjecture to assume that at this point Gayarré and Cable circulated within similar intellectual communities in the city (Turner 52). Even as late as 1881, following the publication of both *Old Creole Days* and *The Grandissimes*, Cable and Gayarré remained on speaking terms. That year Cable brought the artist Joseph Pennell, who had worked on illustrations for Virginian local colorist Thomas Nelson Page's books, to meet Gayarré (Turner 118-9). However, Cable's relationship with the old guard Creoles of New Orleans clearly deteriorated as the year continued, since by the spring that followed this visit with Gayarré, Pennell would confess in a letter that Cable had begun having trouble accessing the upper echelons of white Creole society due to local distaste for *The Grandissimes*. As a result of his depictions of white Creole characters as rigid traditionalists speaking broken English and clinging to hypocritical claims of racial purity, Cable had become – in Pennell's view – "the most cordially hated little man in New Orleans" (57).

The traditional critical narrative of the Creole controversy that brought Cable to this pass unfolds as follows: The publication of Cable's *Old Creole Days* and *The Grandissimes* incensed the white Creole population of New Orleans, who objected vehemently to the implication in these texts that putatively "white" Creoles, despite their claims of racial purity, were related by blood to families of color due to long-standing interracial sexual mixing. Spurning Cable as an

outsider and a liar, the white Creoles rallied behind the historian Gayarré as their defender. Lecturing at Tulane University in 1885 on "The Creoles of History and the Creoles of Romance," Gayarré asserted that the word *Creole* "signified a white human being *created* in the colonies of Africa and America – a native of European extraction, whose origin was known and whose superior Caucasian blood was never to be assimilated to the baser liquid that ran in the veins of the Indian and African native" (2). Despite substantial evidence to the contrary, Gayarré asserted that to be Creole was to be of "pure white blood" (3). Cable, hounded out of the city by the ill will of the white Creole populace, shook the dust of the South from his feet, settled in Massachusetts in 1885, and dedicated more and more of his time to his writings on social and political reform (eg. "The Silent South").

There is nothing particularly untrue about this existing history of the controversy. Virginia R. Domínguez carefully dissects the tangled racial definitions of the word *Creole* in her masterful book *White By Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*, a work which focuses on the "near-obsession with metasemantics" that gripped New Orleans society in the 1880s and 1890s (143). Similarly, Joseph G. Tregle, Jr.'s lyrically-composed essay "Creoles and Americans" in the collection *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* continues the tradition of examining the debate between Cable and his detractors as one over racial categories. As established in the first section of this chapter, Gayarré and Cable both held their respective lines in this dispute – Gayarré bristling at the threat to the perceived purity of the past and Cable pushing for an honest acknowledgment of racial mixing in New Orleans in order to encourage future conversations about cross-racial interaction in the city. While it is not my intention to downplay the role that race and racial anxiety played in Gayarré's repeated false assertions of Creole racial purity, I would like to approach this dispute over racial definitions as a debate over

local knowledge and its literary depiction. This section argues that the Creole controversy hinges upon questions of who has the authority to disseminate local knowledge to a national audience and who has the authority to determine what counts as a misinterpretation or misreading of this local knowledge as it is filtered through literature. The anxiety that prodded Gayarré and other white Creoles to launch attacks on Cable is ultimately an anxiety about misreading, an anxiety that readers outside of New Orleans would accept Cable's "false" definition of *Creole* and depictions of Creole characters as corresponding to lived reality. As such, it is an anxiety about literature and hermeneutics as well as a racial anxiety. Therefore this section will attend to those attacks on Cable that emphasized his alleged failure as a writer – his failure to realistically represent the ethnographic "realities" of Creole life and his failure, in depicting Creoles as grotesque ethnics, to adhere to a "sunny" literary romanticism.

The historical truths of the Creole controversy are relatively clear. In antebellum Louisiana the term *Creole* did not inherently signify racial purity or whiteness, yet it also did not necessarily signify that one was of mixed blood (Tregle 139). Following Caribbean colonial usage of the term, Louisianans used the word *Creole* to denote an individual born in the colony, and antebellum white Creoles went so far as to laugh off outsiders' assumptions that the term carried implications of racial mixing (Tregle 137; 139). Yet racial mixing did invariably occur, ritualized through the practice of *plaçage* in which white Creole men attended quadroon balls, chose attractive young mixed-race women for their mistresses, and set these women up with apartments in the French Quarter (Tregle 149). References to such mixing can be found in the poetry of Armand Lanusse's *Les Cenelles* (1845), the first anthology of black poets published in the United States. The anthology includes Lanusse's own poem "Epigramme" that depicts a woman of color asking a Catholic priest in the confessional to help her "*placer ma fille*" to

ensure the family's economic stability (94). Cable's fiction, including "'Tite Poulette" (published in the initial version of *Old Creole Days*) and the novella *Madame Delphine* (published in later editions of the collection), depicts such relationships in detail as well.

Following the critical model established by Domínguez and Tregle, Rien Fertel's recent assessment of the Creole controversy in *Imagining the Creole City* maintains the focus on the racial anxieties that motivated the various actors within the debate. Pulling from observations that have arisen out of whiteness studies, Fertel argues that what motivated Creole attacks on Cable were the same anxieties that led other non-Anglo ethnic groups within the United States to assert their whiteness as a means of claiming social stature and distancing themselves from accusations of racial impurity or blackness (73). Fertel's compelling contribution to the discussion started by Domínguez and Tregle is his illumination of how this debate during the 1880s revised the terms of Creole exceptionalism, which up until that point had relied upon an assertion of Francophone literary production and, in Fertel's terminology, "the cultivation of a Creole print *terroir*" (11). Following the Creole controversy, this exceptionalism found an expression via claims of racial purity rather than claims of Francophone distinctiveness.

Yet while white Creoles articulated their objections to Cable in racial terms, the rhetoric they used to frame these objections often targets perceived literary and stylistic infelicities. An analysis of two major critiques of Cable published during the Creole controversy – Adrien Rouquette's pamphlet *Critical Dialogue Between Aboo and Caboo on a New Book, or a Grandissime Ascension* (1880) and Gayarré's Tulane lecture "The Creoles of History and the Creoles of Romance" (1885) – demonstrates how the racial rhetoric of this controversy overlaps with cultural questions about local knowledge and literary questions about the distinction between the modes of realism and romance.

Rouquette's pamphlet, published pseudonymously under the name E. Junius, attacks Cable as both a failed romanticist and a failed realist. That Rouquette (and not Gayarré) should lead this early charge against Cable and *The Grandissimes* and that he should express his attack with such vitriol is somewhat bizarre. A Catholic priest, an early French romanticist in the tradition of Chateaubriand, and an editor of the local archdiocesan newspaper, Rouquette had exiled himself from New Orleans in the late 1850s, settled in the Choctaw village of Buchuwa on the other side of Lake Pontchartrain, and taken on the name Chahta-Ima (Fertel 47). What motivated Rouquette to re-enter New Orleanian literary politics at such a late stage in his life and after such a long absence from the city remains a mystery. Yet when he returned, he returned breathing fire, castigating Cable on both historical and literary grounds.

Framed as a found manuscript, *Critical Dialogue Between Aboo and Caboo* recounts the discussion between the ghost of *The Grandissimes*'s Agricola Fusilier (who has, post-mortem, taken on the name Aboo) and his descendent Caboo. Fuming over the publication of *The Grandissimes*, Aboo tells his interlocutor that it is "neither historical or romantic, in any true sense of what we term history or romance" (9). Thus begins a systematic takedown of *The Grandissimes* as a failure both as a work of literary realism and literary romanticism. Rouquette seems unconcerned with whether or not these two modes require different aesthetic criteria. Rather, Aboo and Caboo shuttle back and forth between critiquing *The Grandissimes* for being too prone to romantic play with the truth of reality and for being unable to convey accurately that historical reality. Aboo rails against Cable's misreading of Creole culture:

> This Cablishissime romanticist, this ill-natured *alien*, this polyglot wight, who safely bore and in due time brought forth this now so much admired, fondled and indulged progeniture, has an evil eye to detect and seize upon whatever seems to him burlesque, ridiculous, or odious; and he so excels in exaggerating what he sees or seems to see, that we have distorted images of fancy-wrought caricatures, instead of life-like pictures, fair resemblances of natural realities. (10)

If Hawthorne took pleasure in literary romanticism for the way it, like moonlight, defamiliarized the commonplace and provided a "neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (45-6), Aboo and Caboo take no delight in such distortions. The eye of the romanticist here becomes the evil eye, the perspective that warps the forms of lived reality into grotesque shapes and that, instead of melding the material and the imagined into a coherent and pleasing aesthetic harmony, exaggerates the ugliness of reality to create a vulgar caricature. Instead of the moonlight and shadows of Hawthorne that give greater interest to a domestic scene, we find Aboo reacting against "shadows of truth, false appearances, fictitious characters, imaginary personages, fantastic visions . . .striving, fighting to hide the charming face of truth" (11). For Aboo this lack of truthfulness in *The Grandissimes* shatters the classical unity of the three transcendentals: the True, the Beautiful, and the Good. "What is not true, not good," quips Aboo to Caboo, "cannot be beautiful" (9). Thus, according to Rouquette, the failure of Cable's romance stems from its inability to accurately represent the material truths of the world. As such his fictions represent for Rouquette not imaginative play with Creole history (much as Hawthorne had played imaginatively with Puritan history) but rather works which "slanderously misrepresented" cultural and racial facts (9).

Similarly, the pamphlet accuses the "alien" Cable of not knowing where to access proper knowledge about the history of New Orleans. Rouquette derides Cable for pulling from the wrong sources of local truth (read: non-white sources of local truth), criticizing him for gathering his "*historical* information from the babbling lips of some old negresses" (11). Though such racism comes as something of a surprise from a priest who had identified so much with the Choctaw as to take on a Choctaw name and live among them, it is evident that Rouquette's

affection for American Indians did not preclude specifically anti-black racism or a belief in racial hierarchies. What is particularly jarring for Rouquette is how Cable slips these allegedly ugly falsehoods and exaggerations into a novel alongside more pleasing, beautiful, and romanticized depictions of Louisiana and its landscape. By doing so Cable becomes a seducer, a "great wizard of romanticism" who might with his charms lead the reader away from the true and the good (12).

Rouquette's focus on reader reception of Cable's texts indicates his anxieties about misreading and misinterpretation of both genre and historical information. Attacking the hermeneutic failings of the audience itself, the introduction to the dialogue claims that Cable's fictional works "were given as *novels* and they have been taken for HISTORY [emphasis in original]" (4). While the readers receive their comeuppance from Aboo and Caboo for their inability to identify the genre of Cable's texts, Aboo does not miss a chance to accuse Cable of maliciously relying upon the audience's ignorance and biases to push anti-Southern rhetoric upon them. Aboo argues that Cable intentionally wrote *The Grandissimes* for "the prejudiced and inimical North" (9). Caboo takes up this claim later, agreeing that Cable has pre-determined what a Northern literary market wants to believe about the South and has cannily designed his texts to provide fodder for Northern prejudices. Caboo frames Cable, then, as not an artist but a seducer, not a proponent of the true, the beautiful, and the good but rather a "Sam Slick of magazine literature" (11). This anxiety about Northern misinterpretations of Cable is not limited to Rouquette but also appears in a speech given against Cable by local judge F. P. Poché at Creole Day festivities in 1886 in which he claimed "that one of the humiliations of the Creoles is to have been at all times misrepresented as to their origin, their character, their morals and their customs" (qtd. in Domínguez 145).

While later criticism would frame him as the chief opponent of Cable in the Creole controversy, Gayarré remained relatively silent on the matter of Cable's fiction even after the publication of Rouquette's 1880 pamphlet. Though Gayarré's later words and actions against Cable color our understanding of their relationship, it is significant to remember that Gayarré had not initially been on the warpath against Cable. In fact, Gayarré had written a kind letter to Cable as late as October 27, 1880 (the year *The Grandissimes* was published), requesting literary counsel. In that letter, Gayarré expressed his desire to benefit from Cable's "advice and experience" (qtd. in Turner 200). It would be four years before Gayarré would firmly take up his pen against Cable's suggestions of racial mixing among the Creole population of Louisiana. In a *Times-Democrat* article from 1884, Gayarré explicitly claimed that the term *Creole* only applied to white children born in the former colony of Louisiana and not to any "negros [*sic*], mulattoes, or Indians" except as an adjective signifying ownership or possession, the way one might refer to a colonial variety of a tomato as a Creole tomato (12). Creole, Gayarré concluded, "signifies only one of pure and unmixed European blood" (12).

In asserting this pure whiteness of Creoles, Gayarré pushed back against such Cable characters as Honoré Grandissime, f.m.c., and the mixed-race Creole daughters of former quadroon ball belles such as 'Tite Poulette of *Old Creole Days*. Cable treats these characters with sensitivity, portraying them as figures caught within a complex and oppressive system that disrupts their ambitions and alienates them from their own families. These characters can only re-integrate themselves into the social order by establishing that their blackness was either a lie (as Madame Zalli does for her adopted daughter in "'Tite Poulette"), by the promulgation of a lie *that conceals* their blackness (as Madame Delphine does for Olive in *Madame Delphine*), or by departing the United States altogether for more racially-equitable conditions in France (the

course we see Honoré Grandissime, f.m.c., take at the end of *The Grandissimes*). Though he might have argued to the contrary in public, Gayarré knew quite well that such depictions of the struggles facing Creoles of color regarding their relations to white Creole families were not simply the romantic struggles of fiction. In 1826, the venerable Père Antoine (Antonio de Sedella, a famous New Orleanian who would himself appear in Gayarré's *Fernando de Lemos*) baptized the child of free woman of color Delphina Les Maitre, an infant christened Carlos Harthur Nicholas Gayarré (Fertel 92). Whether Charles Étienne Arthur Gayarré recognized this child as a Creole or simply as an illegitimate offshoot of a white Creole family tree (and thus not worthy of being called a Creole under Gayarré's racially-pure definition of the term) will presumably remain an unhappy historical mystery.

In April of 1885, likely prodded by Cable's publication of the reformist essay "The Freedman's Case in Equity," Gayarré launched his most stinging critique of Cable at a Tulane lecture hall under the title "The Creoles of History and the Creoles of Romance." As Rouquette had done in *Critical Dialogue of Aboo and Caboo*, this lecture castigated Cable for failing as a realist and as a romanticist. Opening with a moderate gesture, an acknowledgment that language is inherently fluid and prone to change over time, Gayarré quickly turns an about-face to defend a rigid and racist definition of *Creole* as not referring to "the mahogany-tinted small fry of God's creation" but rather as a word that "could only be the birthright of the superior white race" (1). If the Aboo and Caboo pamphlet shows us an uncharacteristic Rouquette at his most belligerent, the Tulane lecture shows us Gayarré at his most racist. Here also is the Gayarré who objects to Cable's depiction of Creoles because such depictions unsettle the aristocratic hierarchies of the old order. Gayarré's key argumentative move in the lecture is to attempt to give historical and factual refutation of Cable's claims of racial mixing in *Old Creole Days* and *The Grandissimes*,

but often such refutations suffer from Gayarré's inability to imagine the complex daily realities that existed beyond official statements and legal codes. For instance, Gayarré holds to the fantasy that the establishment of the Code Noir by Bienville in 1724

> raised Alpine heights, nay, it threw the Andes as a wall between the blacks, or colored, and the natives of France, as well as the natives of Louisiana, or Creoles. There could be no marriage between the two races . . . It shows the horror of miscegenation that always existed, and that was preserved actively alive between the superior race and the inferior or abject one. (6)

Such claims find Gayarré at his least imaginative, confusing the abstractions of the law and the racialized social ideal for actual lived practice in the colonies. It is significant, though, to note Gayarré's fixation upon hierarchies here and his persistent appeal to the logic of hierarchies to resist Cable's claims.

Following the example of Rouquette, Gayarré pairs this critique of Cable's historical realism with a critique of Cable's failings as a literary romanticist. At times following the narrative of *The Grandissimes* line-by-line, Gayarré lambasts the perceived literary failings of the novel and the craftsmanship of the author. Here Gayarré, just as he had with his historical critique of Cable, displays a surprising lack of imagination and flexibility for an author who had himself published drama, fiction, and romanticized histories. Gayarré chooses a line from the opening ball scene of *The Grandissimes* to critique Cable's literary abilities, a line that runs as follows: "Under the twinkle of numerous candles, and in a perfumed air thrilled with the wailing ecstasy of violins, the little Creole capital's proudest and best were offering up the first cool night of the languidly departing summer to the divine Terpsichore" (1). Gayarré eviscerates the line:

> According to the English meaning of the word *thrill*, we are given to understand that this *wailing ecstasy* of the violins had pierced the perfumed air with a sharp shivering sensation, and we logically infer that the shivering air must have communicated its own sensation to the whole assembly and considerably refrigerated its cheerfulness. But what sort of dances, contradances, and waltzes must the violins have been playing to be thrown into a "wailing ecstasy?" If it were possible to unite together wailing and ecstasy, it

certainly would suit a funeral better than a ball. (19)

Gayarré's exercise in literalism resists the romantic fusing of opposites (wailing and ecstasy), a fusion he himself (as we will see in the final section of this chapter) utilized in descriptions of violin-playing in his own novel *Fernando de Lemos*. Yet what we can also take away from a consideration of Gayarré's Tulane lecture is a renewed attention to the literary aspects of the Creole controversy, a renewed awareness that though the disputes which fueled the passions of Rouquette and Gayarré were disputes over racial definitions, the criteria they used to attack Cable were distinctly literary criteria, the criteria of realism and romanticism.

Beset by such critiques, Cable shied away from engaging attacks on his sentence-level style as an author but did respond to those attacks which touched upon the realism of *Old Creole Days* and *The Grandissimes*. Just as Rouquette and Gayarré had used claims of local knowledge to buttress their arguments, Cable himself utilized specific details about his life and experiences in New Orleans to assert his own status as a local. Against Gayarré's false assertions in the *Times-Democrat* that Cable could not name two Creole families at whose homes he was received, Cable insisted that not only did he count several Creoles among his personal friends but that he also used these very individuals as models for his fictional characters (Turner 203). Throughout his life and letters, Cable consistently maintained these claims. In "After-Thoughts of a Storyteller," Cable acknowledged publicly that Aurora Nancanou was based on a former neighbor. Writing to his wife Louisa in 1887, he noted that Adolph Schreiber had been the inspiration for Honoré Grandissime (Turner 92). To a curious reader of *The Grandissimes*, Cable acknowledged, "I have known him [the real Honoré Grandissime] for years. I met him only last week in Canal Street" (Clay 270). We find Cable again and again positioning himself as a faithful writer of realist literature and as a local colorist, a dutiful ethnographer encoding

empirical data about his region within his fiction.

Cable himself was no stranger to empirical data collection. During his time as a surveyor, he composed an extensive 1880 census office report on New Orleans that he later rewrote for a public audience as *The Creoles of Louisiana* (1884). Early reviews of his literary output praise his accuracy as well, and his deeply-attuned ear for distinct sounds allowed him not only to record variations in local dialect with precision but also (like twentieth-century composer Olivier Messiaen) to accurately transcribe birdsong (Powell 2). Recently Brian Hochman in his essay "Hearing Lost, Hearing Found: George Washington Cable and the Phono-Ethnographic Ear" rearticulated the connections between Cable's precision with dialect and the era of "Edison's talking machine" (520), raising fascinating questions about the historical moment when dialect literature began to be seen as less accurate than audio recordings as a means of conveying the realistic details of local linguistic patterns.

So, despite Rouquette's desire to paint Cable as a blurry-eyed (or evil-eyed) romanticist, such claims fall apart when considered alongside the careful balance Cable achieves between realism and romance in his fictional literary output. William Dean Howells, writing in *Heroines of Fiction*, praised *The Grandissimes* "for a certain blend of romance and reality, which does no wrong to either component property" (240). Though Howells himself does not identify a specific instance where we see Cable blending romance and reality together, we can find such blending in the seventeenth chapter of *The Grandissimes*, a chapter entitled "That Night." The chapter allows the reader to pause, with Frowenfeld, and attempt to process the often confusing and quickly-moving plot. The ever-playful narrative voice of the novel chides readers for failing to truly appreciate their nights and urges us to be aware that "Our nights are the keys to our days. They explain them. They are also the day's correctors" (93). On such a night as "that night," the

narrator claims, "Certain of the Muses were abroad" (95), inspiring the black singers in the slave yard as they make musical mockery of the Grandissime family for Honoré's support of the newly established American government. Here Cable records the dialect of black Creoles in New Orleans while placing the song in the context of a romanticized description of the city at night. The song consolidates memories, calls forth new associations, and provides Frowenfeld (listening to the distant melody from his bedroom behind the apothecary shop) with material for nocturnal musing:

> Faintly audible to the apothecary of the rue Royale through that deserted stillness which is yet the marked peculiarity of New Orleans streets by night, came from the neighboring slave-yard the monotonous chant and machine-like tune-beat of an African dance . . . There was a new distich to the song to-night, signifying that the pride of the Grandissimes must find his friends now among the Yankees:
>
> *"Miché Hon're, allé! h-allé!*
> *Trouvé to zamis parmi les Yankis.*
> *Dancé calinda, bou-joum! bou-joum!*
> *Dancé calinda, bou-joum! bou-joum!"*
>
> Frowenfeld, as we have already said, had closed his shop, and was sitting in the room behind it with one arm on his table and the other on his celestial globe, watching the flicker of his small fire and musing upon the unusual experiences of the evening. Upon every side there seemed to start away from his turning glance the multiplied shadows of something wrong . . . Even in the bright recollection of the lady and her talk he became involved among shadows, and going from bad to worse, seemed at length almost to gasp in an atmosphere of hints, allusions, faint unspoken admissions, ill-concealed antipathies, unfinished speeches, mistaken identities, and whisperings of hidden strife. (95-6)

As we once found him puzzling over the book of the Community of New Orleans, here again we find Frowenfeld our fellow-interpreter in the midst of shadows, ambiguity, and the blending together of characters' story arcs. Alongside the tools of this empirically-minded young scholar (the celestial globe which demonstrates the positions of the stars in the sky), we find the fire that elicits musings about mutability and indeterminacy. Similarly in this passage, Cable blends elements of realistic accuracy (the dialect of the slave song and the ethnographic details provided about the function of slave songs as poetic spaces of mockery and satire in the antebellum South)

with elements of romantic fancy (the musings and fire-gazing we also find prompting characters' imaginations in the work of Dickens). In Frowenfeld once more, we find a figure analogous to the reader of *The Grandissimes* (and by extension any reader of local color fiction) in a position between scientific certainty and romantic ambiguity.

Lawrence Buell, who lists *The Grandissimes* as a failed contender for the title of Great American Novel, notes that "as with the convolutions of Henry James's late work . . . *The Grandissimes*'s rhetorical impenetrability" demonstrates "the asymptotic limit of precise rendering of expressive nuance" (276). As such, it places readers in a space which presents us with allegedly realistic fact while reminding us that literary representation also accounts for the impenetrable, the illegible, and the mysterious – those phenomenon which we can only approach via allusion, ambiguity, or paradox. Now, in the final section of this chapter, we will move from considerations of the Creole controversy through a literary lens to the literary output of Gayarré and Cable themselves – paying particular attention to how their works illuminate the status of local color as a literary space between the two modes of realism and romanticism. As such, their works also illustrate how local color's blending of these modes allows for an encounter (albeit a tense one) between seemingly incompatible epistemologies, between the empirical and the mystical, between data and mystery.

Truth and Fiction: Gayarré's Fernando de Lemos *and Cable's* Strange True Stories of Louisiana

As noted above, the critical conversation thus far regarding the Creole controversy regularly positions Charles Gayarré as historian-critic against Cable as an author of fiction. In keeping with the objectives of this entire chapter, this final section will flip conventional readings of Gayarré and position him as a fellow local colorist alongside Cable, grappling with

the same fundamental tensions between a realist and a romanticist mode. The texts under consideration here will be Gayarré's novel *Fernando de Lemos: Truth and Fiction* (1872) and Cable's *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* (1889), with particular focus placed on the section "The ‘Haunted House' in Royal Street." Both books have received scant critical attention. Rien Fertel mentions *Fernando de Lemos* in passing in *Imagining the Creole City* and relies upon it mainly as a means of working out missing sections of Gayarré's own biography, but apart from that, the novel has yet to attract a thorough critical reading. Cable's *Strange True Stories* has fared better (at least among tourists to the Pelican State) due to its somewhat ubiquitous presence in bookstores and gift shops at Louisiana tourist attractions. On the critical scene, however, it has failed to attract much attention outside the circles of Cable scholars. My rationale for using both of these texts here – rather than more canonical works – is twofold. First, the texts allow us to analyze Gayarré at his most literary and approach Cable via those works in which he operates at the border of fiction-writer and historian. Second, *Fernando de Lemos* and *Strange True Stories* both provide material for answering the major questions of this chapter: how an author frames the distinction between the truth of history and the truth of romance and how that framing is intrinsic to local color as a literary genre. These questions are not incidental to these texts; they are these texts' crucial thematic concerns. *Fernando de Lemos* repeatedly contrasts the romantic glories of pre-revolutionary Europe with the dangers of Enlightenment rationalism and nineteenth-century materialism. In *Strange True Stories*, we find the ever-playful Cable muddying the waters of this very same insistence on verifiable truth, utilizing the historical record of newspapers and notary papers to ground his narrative while simultaneously highlighting the contradictions of these records and destabilizing their authority. Cable's *Strange True Stories*, like Gayarré's *Fernando de Lemos*, points to a conception of literary truth that

harkens back to Gadamer's insistence on hermeneutic horizons not as limits but as participants in the act of interpretation. Both texts flirt with the limitations of seemingly contradictory approaches to truth, a flirtation that the aesthetic of local color makes possible.

We can pair Gadamer's theory here with the observation of Cable scholar Susan Castillo, who in her essay "Stones in the Quarry: George Washington Cable's *Strange True Stories*" uses the theoretical model of Hayden White to remind us that what we are dealing with in these texts is "the conflict between two concepts of truth, that is, the truth of correspondence or the referentiality of the text to extra-textual elements, and the truth of coherence (the ways in which the elements in the text cohere to form a vision of reality)" (20). Castillo continues, in the vein of White, to argue that in pre-Enlightenment models of understanding history, "'Truth' was … not equated with 'fact' but rather with facts inserted within a conceptual matrix. Therefore in order to see the truth adequately, one was obliged to use imagination or creativity" (20). While such logic resonates with Gadamer's understanding of limits and borders as prerequisites for interpretation, it also underpins the claims of Gayarré and Cable about the use of literary art in framing truth and transmitting knowledge. For, as Gayarré claims in *Romance of the History of Louisiana*, art "honies the cup of useful knowledge" (16), echoing Cable's own claim in the introduction to *Strange True Stories* that raw historical data are "stones in the quarry" that require the skill of the artist to render them harmonious and pleasing (1). In blending this realism and romanticism (and exposing the tension between these literary modes), *Fernando de Lemos* and *Strange True Stories* also constitute attempts to blend and trouble two forms of understanding truth – truth as empirical, verifiable fact and truth as an understanding of particular details as read through a specific hermeneutic and conceptual framework.

Before analyzing the fiction of Gayarré and Cable at length, it is important to clarify that

though local color as a mode contains elements of literary realism and literary romanticism in tension with one another, this tension does not necessarily need to be read as negatively valenced. Nor does acknowledging this tension necessarily mean that realism and romanticism exist as diametrically-opposed binaries. The early Cable scholar Richard Bozman Eaton argues as much with his claim that the blend of Howellsian realism (with great attention to local particularities of dialect and custom) and the flights of romantic fancy we find in Cable's works should not strike us as particularly surprising:

> The technical qualities the novel [*The Grandissimes*] shares with the realistic tradition – fidelity to fact, care in the recording of dialectical curiosities, the detailed description and analyses of a particular world and society – are indeed just as much a part of the romantic tradition of Scott as they are of Howells. (88)

Thus it should not be said that realism and romanticism are at war in *Fernando de Lemos* and *Strange True Stories* but rather that the tension between their competing models of truth is a productive tension, one which furthers Gayarré's and Cable's arguments regarding the use of the imagination in interpreting the world.

For instance, even Gayarré's historical writings partake in this use of the imaginative faculty to frame history in romantic fashion. In *Louisiana, Its Colonial History and Romance*, Gayarré claims that his historical work

> rests on such evidence as would be received by a court of justice, and that what I have borrowed of the *poet* for the benefit of the *historian*, is hardly equivalent [*sic*] to the delicately wrought drapery which even the Sculptor would deem necessary, as a graceful appendage to the nakedness of the statue of truth. (xiv)

Such a claim is not unique to Gayarré among nineteenth-century historians, but the metaphor of cloaking the "nakedness" of truth should strike us as telling in light of Gayarré's use of an abstract, generalized version of history during the Creole controversy to cloak the less seemly details of white sexual exploitation of persons of color in antebellum Louisiana. At other points

in *Louisiana, Its Colonial History and Romance*, one finds Gayarré overstepping his claim that his poetic ornamentation of history consists merely of making truth more aesthetically pleasing. In recounting the death of French colonial proprietor Antoine Crozat's daughter (who apparently died of grief after being forced into an unhappy marriage for political reasons), Gayarré changes the actual name of the daughter, Marie Anne, to Andrea. In an addendum to the text, Gayarré confesses the change and notes that for him, there was simply "some spell in the name of Andrea" (194). Even if we accept historical writing as a narrative genre more malleable than commonly supposed, this change of Marie Anne Crozat to Andrea is clearly an example of Gayarré's deliberate inclusion of a falsehood in the historical record, not an "imaginative re-rendering" of an event. One must ask how far the "honey" that Gayarré has introduced to the cup of knowledge actually changed the substance of that knowledge itself. Thus even in his historical writings, we find in Gayarré those touches of a writer of fiction that complicate conventional readings of him as the historian counterpart to Cable the *litterateur*.

More imaginative than they are often given credit for, Gayarré's historical and fictional works demonstrate his deep devotion to a conception of the mind as reliant upon the imagination to color material reality. "It is true that without imagination there may be a world within the mind," writes Gayarré in *Romance of the History of Louisiana*, "but it is a world without light" (24). The very title of *Fernando de Lemos: Truth and Fiction* points to the importance of imagination in giving a framework of significance to the truths of autobiographical reality. The stylized autobiography of Gayarré's life takes up as its chief thematic concern an anxiety that rigid philosophical materialism will disrupt a more romantic, colorful, and playful conception of the world. In characteristic fashion, Gayarré positions Enlightenment liberalism on the side of this materialism and dramatizes how it seeks the destabilization of non-liberal models of

community formation and the discrediting, destruction, and erasure of metaphysical, religious, or otherwise spiritual realities. As such *Fernando de Lemos* represents for readers the dramatized conflict between extreme versions of the materialist truths of literary realism and the more impalpable truths of literary romance.

Accounting for the "truth" of the *Truth and Fiction* of the novel's title, *Fernando de Lemos* includes a cast of characters who are either fictionalized versions of actual historical individuals or who have been adapted from real-life models. As Fertel has pointed out, Fernando himself can be read (without much hesitation) as a clear stand-in for Gayarré himself insofar as Fernando's path from New Orleans to Europe and back again recreates the author's own travels. The faculty depicted instructing the young Fernando at the College of Orleans include the revolutionary Lakanal, the mathematician Teinturier, and the literature professor (and school president) Rochefort. In fact, in the depiction of Fernando's schooldays, Gayarré goes so far as to take words the actual Rochefort shared with him from his deathbed and to copy them out as the character Rochefort's last words to the character Fernando. The historical record indicates that Rochefort had told him, "You are my work, boy; you are my work – never forget it!" (Hunt 56). Compare those lines with the deathbed exhortation from Rochefort to Fernando: "Let me kiss, child, those capitolian lips before I am wafted across the Styx by old Charon. *Os magna locuturus* [A mouth which is destined to speak great things], I predict. Ha, ha! *Macte animo, peur* [Strive on with increasing courage, boy]! You are my work, boy; you are my work – never forget it" (18). Other historical personages who take their place among the cast of *Fernando de Lemos* include several members of the Bourbon Restorationist salons that Gayarré frequented (like his title character) during his time in Europe along with other nineteenth-century authors and politicians from both France and the United States: King Louis Philippe, Alexis de

Tocqueville, literary realist Honoré de Balzac, the French playwright Marguerite-Louise Virginie Ancelot, and Chief Justice Francis Xavier Martin (to name a few major examples).

Among these historical figures from Louisiana and France, Teinturier the mathematics instructor stands out as a figure whose characteristics place him at a point of tension between the material world and the realm of imagination and fancy. While Rochefort encourages his pupil Fernando to delight in poetry and the arts, Teinturier grows livid when his students express their affection for poetry. In a utilitarian condemnation of the arts, Teinturier fumes:

> What is there in that thing called poetry? What does it prove? What is it good for? Does it demonstrate any truth? Did any two persons ever agree as to its merits? What constitutes its essence? What is poetry, and what is it not? As well might one attempt to analyze the substance of a shadow. Will poetry build a bridge, or a house, or a fortification, or an engine? Will it steer a ship, or calculate the march of the heavenly bodies? (23)

With its skepticism towards poetry's ability to convey truth, Teinturier's argument here might be productively compared to that of Rouquette's Aboo and Caboo. Both express uneasiness with the way literary romanticism, because of its inherent ambiguities and vagaries, might open the door to misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the truth. Yet for all his excoriation of poetry and poets, Teinturier is presented by Gayarré as one of the most colorful and romantic characters we find in the College of Orleans chapters of the novel. If romanticism presents readers with the defamiliarized, the strange, and the peculiar, then Teinturier the mathematician delivers these in spades. An avid gardener, Teinturier can be seen in his garden "working the whole night by moonlight," and "in the hottest months of the year he would strip himself stark naked, and work lustily in his garden in the primitive costume of Adam" (20). Fascinated by the insects and small creatures his students find for him, Teinturier has the habit of fastening these to his clothing and walking through the streets of the French Quarter like a human pin-board. Fernando explains how the students liked to "present him with toads, frogs, bugs, butterflies, and all sorts of insects

which we had caught. He invariably pinned them to his hat and his sleeves, and went home, moving like a somnambulist" (22). In such descriptions we find the blend of romantic fancy and biographical truth – the strange and the true working together harmoniously and ironically through the person of a character skeptical of the fruits of poetry and romance.

Though Gayarré's depiction of Teinturier does not present an opposition to poetry and romance as a politically-charged resistance, as Fernando ages we find him and the characters around him taking sides in an exaggerated conflict between a modernity linked to philosophical materialism and an aristocratic, pre-liberal ethos protective of metaphysical truths outside the realm of empirical science. Almost invariably Gayarré links materialism with the new order of post-Enlightenment Europe and democratic America and – in keeping with his commitments as outlined in section one of this chapter – expresses horror at materialism's ability to destroy and destabilize traditional structures of meaning. During his travels outside of the United States Fernando decries the loss of pre-modern regional cultures in the Pyrenees, but he finds in the salons of Paris a respite from modernity amid the lingering European nobility. At one of these salons hosted by a Spanish ambassador, the *philosophe* Madame Ancelot tells Fernando, "Look round. Is this not a fairy scene and an appropriate meeting ground for illusions of all sorts? Is this the time and the place for an introduction of truth in the coarse apparel and with the unpainted cheeks of a buxom country girl? No" (72). As such, the salons provide Fernando with a space of fantasy within a quickly modernizing Europe. The salons function as spaces of retreat that, while acknowledging the material and historical realities of the outside world, refuse to grant them entrance to their sanctuary.

Unlike Madame Ancelot, the St. Louis graveyard sexton Tintin Calandro – perhaps second only to Fernando himself as a major character in the novel – does not frame the

imagination as part of illusion but rather embraces the imaginative and the fanciful as means of holding to metaphysical truths in an age of increasing philosophical materialism. "Materialism and utilitarianism are the gods of the age," he declares, "I do not belong to it certainly, and in it I feel out of place" (130). Amid the whitewashed, above-ground tombs of the cemetery, Tintin plays his violin for Fernando and the dead alike. He is a character caught up in the delight of the metaphysical. While the grandees of Spain and the aristocrats of France find refuge in their salons from the chaos of modern Europe, Tintin finds consolation in the graveyard insofar as it is a space that forces individuals to confront the realities of death and what follows. Gayarré repeatedly makes use of the cemetery as a site of resistance against modernity and materialism, placing into Tintin's mouth lengthy speeches on theology and philosophy. Yet Tintin's most compelling moments come not in the midst of these drawn-out harangues but in his succinct maxims against materialism. At one point Tintin argues to Fernando that "It is impossible to be a materialist and to decorate a tomb with flowers" (149). Shortly after this, Tintin explains, "A graveyard, my friend, is an eloquent protest against the doctrine of materialism, which some wish to raise to the dignity of a new creed destructive of superstition and priestly domination. Hence I love graveyards" (152).

Gayarré's novel utilizes Tintin as a figure to critique a positivist vision of the world in which knowledge can only come through sensory means. One of the chief flaws of the novel is that these critiques come mainly through Tintin's extended tirades, but at moments Gayarré (ever open to romantic possibilities) allows Tintin's actions in the St. Louis Cemetery to speak more eloquently than his rhetoric. On holidays, Fernando sneaks into the cemetery to listen to Tintin give concerts on his violin for the spirits of the dead. Here, stripped of his philippics against modernity, Tintin becomes caught up in experiential delight. Fernando sits and interprets the

music for the reader, music which is always themed for the particular holiday. On Mardi Gras, Tintin plays through a sequence of exotic dances for the dead:

> One could hear the gleesome castanets of the Spanish fandango, the sprightly tunes of the Neapolitan dances, the German waltz, the old French minuet, the modern cotillion, the Russian mazourka, the Scottish reel, the American jig, and all the favorite dancing airs of most of the nations of the earth . . . I fancied I saw the scene which Tintin depicted [the carnival of the spirits] and that an irresistible attraction was drawing me within the vortex of the insane crew that shot by with a velocity which it made me giddy to look at, as if it had been a living reality. (365-6)

While Fernando only imagines the dance of the spirits, Tintin indicates that he sees their dances with his own eyes, thus revealing his access to a realm of insight blocked to Fernando. While the carnival dance of the spirits adds romantic color to the novel without much extra metaphysical commentary (beyond Tintin's belief that the spirits do actually return to dance on Mardi Gras as they did in life), Tintin's meditation for the spirits on the vigil of the Nativity takes on a decidedly more theological tone. As Fernando listens under the December stars, Tintin plays a meditation upon the violin that depicts in musical form the mystery of the incarnation itself. Fernando recounts for the reader what the music of Tintin signifies: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (305). Thus the violin-playing of Tintin for the dead under the Christmas starlight becomes not only a romantic flourish but also a commentary for Gayarré about the reality of the incarnation – that through Christ, the divine and the metaphysical make contact and seek union with the material world.

Parsing the truth from the fiction of *Fernando de Lemos* becomes more peculiar as we reach the conclusion of the novel, where Gayarré continues to emphasize the romantic elements of Tintin Calandro's plot arc in tandem with the novel's realist/historical elements. In the last paragraphs of the novel, Gayarré notes that in his sequel *Aubert Dubayet* he will be able to recount information about the villainous Lakanal that he could not have published during

Lakanal's lifetime. Yet alongside these actual historical considerations, we find Fernando sneaking into St. Louis Cemetery after the death of Tintin and experiencing supernatural contact with the ghost of the sexton. Praying before the tomb of Tintin, Fernando recounts:

> I felt a pressure on my right arm; it was the grip of a hand. I looked round in astonishment, and saw nothing. The hand retained its hold, and my mind heard within itself these words: "I am Tintin Calandro, and I am at last permitted to communicate with you, my friend. Think not that this is a dream or delusion." (484-5)

In this moment when Fernando experiences the ghostly presence of Tintin, we as readers reach a hermeneutic impasse between the truth and fiction of the novel's title. Does Gayarré here intend for this encounter with the ghost of Tintin (who assures Fernando that he is not experiencing a delusion) to be read as a fictional part of the narrative? Or must we account for this scene as a semi-autobiographical account of Gayarré's own paranormal experience in the graveyard? To put forward a *tertium quid*, one might argue that this climactic scene itself – when read in light of the novel's aggressive anti-materialism – forces the reader to read Fernando's claim of such an encounter seriously within the conceptual matrix of the novel itself and its insistence upon the existence of a metaphysical reality at work in the world.

Cable's *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* shies away from the sweeping metaphysical claims of *Fernando de Lemos*, yet nevertheless we find Cable playing with a similar boundary line between verifiable fact and the "truth of coherence" that connects particular details to larger structures of meaning. As Gayarré blends truth and fiction, we find Cable blending the strange and the true, using even the aesthetic arrangements of his historical material to signify larger political truths connected to his own commitments as a thinker and author. While the conventional critical narrative has posited that Cable – after the masterpieces of *Old Creole Days* and *The Grandissimes* – lost interest in literary fiction and began directing his energy more towards political causes, I argue that we find in *Strange True Stories* that same playfulness and

sprightly narrative voice that characterize Cable's earlier literary output. In his preface to the collection, entitled "How I Got Them," Cable explains how he came by the found manuscripts, trial accounts, journals, and eyewitness reports of events from the state's history that constitute the strange true stories of the title. An example of the reappearance of the dodging, ambivalent narrative voice Cable utilized in *The Grandissimes* can be found in Cable's description of a local judge's eagerness to provide him with material for his collection:

> "I have a true story that I want you to tell. You can dress it out—"
>
> I arrested him with a shake of the head. "Dress me no dresses. Story me no stories. There's not one of a hundred of them that does not lack something essential, for want of which they are good for naught. Keep them for after-dinner chat; but for the novelist they are good to smell, not to eat. And yet— tell me your story." (19)

Like much of the rest of the preface, this passage comically highlights the way that Cable as compiler and author has modified and edited his raw materials. Alice Hall Petry, approaching truth in *Strange True Stories* from a poststructuralist framework in "The Limits of Truth in Cable's ‘Salome Müller,'" has argued that Cable's caginess with truth claims in the text should reinforce deconstructionist claims about the ultimate indeterminacy of language as a means of communicating truth (25). I would respond that such a reading does a disservice to Cable's project and misses the point about the ways in which Cable arranges his material to present truth within his own particular hermeneutic horizon – to arrange the details of these true histories in his collection in such a way as to indicate a truth of coherence, a truth that must be understood within the conceptual matrix of Cable's own intellectual and political commitments. In what follows, an analysis of "The ‘Haunted House' in Royal Street" from *Strange True Stories* speaks to the ways in which Cable's text (like Gayarré's *Fernando de Lemos*) blends romanticist and realistic elements and – out of this space of tension – puts forward a larger truth claim about the structures of meaning through which the author interprets the world. Cable's awareness of what

happens "when art comes in" allows him the aesthetic means to marshal his historical data for the larger purposes of his political project.

Similar to the moves made in the introduction to the collection as a whole, Cable opens "The ‘Haunted House' on Royal Street" with an introductory section that includes comic jabs at how readers read and interact with local color literature. Opening with "When you and ——— make that much talked-of visit to New Orleans," Cable positions the story within a body of touristic literature that encourages its readers to visit the places depicted in the text (192). Considering that the short story will proceed to recount horrific histories of antebellum racial violence and post-Reconstruction political instability in the city, such an opening strikes one as darkly comic in retrospect. Aware that readers had already been scouring the French Quarter of New Orleans to see the "homes" of characters in *Old Creole Days*, Cable quips to his readers as he guides them through the neighborhood, "who can do this present writer the honor to point out the former residence of 'Sieur George, Madame Délicieuse, or Doctor Mossy, or the unrecognizably restored dwelling of Madame Delphine" (193). Cable goes on to debunk other falsehoods told about houses in the Quarter, using historical data to demonstrate that Louis-Philippe could not have lodged in a particular house because it was constructed post-1798. Nor, he assures us, are the claims by several locals that the Marquis de Lafayette stayed at a particular room at "'Sieur George's" house accurate since records show the city arranging lodgings for him elsewhere (193-4). After geographically positioning us at the house on Royal Street, Cable continues to play with readers in his claims that what will follow is a "true" ghost story: "And yet it was through this doorway that the ghosts – figuratively speaking, of course, for we are dealing with plain fact and history – got into this house" (196).

What follows is Cable's version of the history of the Lalaurie house on Royal Street.

Delphine Lalaurie enjoys a luxurious life with her husband and daughters in their French Quarter home. When a neighbor witnesses a slave take a fatal leap from a balcony to avoid punishment by the cowhide-bearing Madame Lalaurie, local gossip begins questioning her treatment of her slaves. Eventually the Lalaurie cook (kept chained to the wall or floor of the kitchen) intentionally sets the building on fire to call attention to the mistreatment of the household's slaves. When the public comes to assist in the salvaging of the family's valuables from the fire, they find slaves locked away in cramped compartments, some of them with untreated wounds festering and worm-ridden. Cable recounts how Lalaurie had to flee from the angry mob in her carriage down the Bayou Road (and pauses, darkly, to offer his touristic readers a catalogue of the pleasurable vacation activities they can enjoy along that same road). Eventually Lalaurie escapes to France, where she allegedly dies in a bizarre boar-hunting accident. Up until this point, Cable's narrative – apart from its tongue-in-cheek tone – hews closely to other accounts of the Lalaurie scandal. Yet, while most narratives about Delphine Lalaurie end at the point of her flight from the city, Cable, utilizing his skills as a storyteller and an historian, juxtaposes the antebellum use of the house as a torture chamber with its Reconstruction history as an experimental interracial school. [11] Following the Battle of Liberty Place (1874) during which the White League (Southern Democrats) attempted to wrest control of Louisiana's government from Radical Republicans, the school finds itself caught in the political and literal crossfire of Reconstruction. Though they lose the Battle of Liberty Place, the White Leaguers maintain a

[11] The Lalaurie House (1140 Royal Street) and its mistress Delphine Lalaurie have been at the forefront of American collective psyche as part of "gothic" New Orleans – from Harriet Martineau's recounting of their story in 1838 in *Retrospect of Western Travel* to Cable's 1889 account to the twenty-first century fictionalization of the Lalaurie history for the 2014 season of the television show *American Horror Story* (starring Kathy Bates as a marvelously haughty Delphine Lalaurie). Like Cable's story, the series utilizes Lalaurie to engage in a critique of contemporary racial tensions. When Lalaurie, who finds herself in the twenty-first century due to a voodoo curse, sees Barack Obama on television, she refuses to believe that a black man has become president. Through her tears, she accuses "the magic box" of spouting lies.

foothold in the city through 1877, at one point asserting their authority by entering the school and demanding that it be purged of any students of color. Cable also plays up this scene for dark comedy, illustrating how difficult a task the White League members have before them. In a scene that would have certainly angered Gayarré, the White League members, fearing retaliation from politically-powerful parents, exempt several "white" Creoles of aristocratic families from dismissal despite clear visible evidence of a mixed racial heritage. The White League also finds itself baffled by students whose dark skin appears to signal a mixed-racial background but who are actually white aristocratic descendants of old Spanish Creoles from the colonial era. Ultimately, the White League's attempt to expel students of color fails, though the school is eventually disbanded and the building repurposed for a music academy.

Throughout this account, Cable plays fast and loose with the authority of the very archival records he uses as foundations for his story. He refers back again and again to printed newspaper records of the events surrounding the Lalaurie house even as he questions their veracity. Attesting that the cook most certainly set the house on fire, Cable notes, "it is in the printed record of the day that she confessed the deed to the mayor of the city" (208). Yet Cable undercuts the claim printed in the newspapers that furniture was thrown off the third floor of the house during its ransacking by an angry mob: "The newspapers, writing fifty-five years ago in the heat and haste of the moment, must have erred as to the heavy pieces of furniture being carried up this cramped flight of stairs" (197). Regarding the participation of both black and white citizens in the mob that attacked the Lalaurie house, Cable presents readers with two alternate sources – noting that the newspapers *L'Abeille* and *The Courier* attest that "all classes and *colors*" took part in the siege on the building while simultaneously including an eyewitness's assertion to Cable himself that "we [whites] wouldn't have allowed that!" (216). Cable the

narrator seems untroubled by the lack of agreement in these details, aware perhaps that such discrepancies are inescapable features of primary documentation. Nevertheless, Cable takes delight in interweaving the archival sources at his disposal, playing with their language and highlighting their romantic elements, remarking that "There is a certain poetry in notarial records" (219).

There is poetry as well in Cable's *use* of such records. In the arrangement of these details, Cable sets the realist elements of his story against his romantic arrangement of them to put forward a larger truth about the racial history of New Orleans. In choosing to juxtapose a popular Gothic "haunted house" story with a scene from the chaotic and not-too-distant days of 1874-77 political crises in Louisiana, Cable reminds his readers (who might be looking for a local color steeped in romanticism) of the political realities that beset postbellum New Orleans, a city he reminds us at the start of the tale "belongs to the living present" (192). Yet again we find the Janus faces of Gayarré and Cable looking along the same plane but in different directions. While Gayarré's *Fernando de Lemos* uses local anecdotes and stories to bemoan the passing of a romantic age into an era of materialism, Cable's *Strange True Stories* uses similar local color material to demonstrate that the dark romanticism of local lore contains political lessons for the present and future. As in Gayarré, we find that the literary "arrangement" of such factual details constitutes a means though which the "stones in the quarry" become raw material to be shaped under the craftsmanship of the artist, a craftsmanship that arranges these details within aesthetic and political frameworks of significance.

Similarly, we find both *Fernando de Lemos* and *Strange True Stories* haunted by ghosts. The ghosts in Gayarré's novel point towards metaphysical realities, but Cable uses the ghost stories surrounding the Lalaurie mansion to play with the boundary between realism and

romanticism. In recounting a young woman's ghostly experience while passing by the mansion, Cable notes that what initially appeared to be the silhouette of a woman standing behind a lattice turned out to be "only a sorcery of moonbeams that fell aslant from the farther side through the skylight of the belvedere's roof and sifted through the lattice. Would that there were no more reality to the story before us" (199). With that comment, Cable disrupts the reader's expectations for a sensationalized ghost story – a piece of vacation entertainment like the ghost tours which still pause before the house on Royal Street today – to note that the violent realities of antebellum and postbellum racism have marked this house with stories more frightening than those about the apparition of ghosts. Cable repeatedly disrupts the romanticized portrayals of ghosts and the Gothic tropes of romance to force the reader back into the present. Halting at one point to ponder Lalaurie's mental state, Cable considers, "Was she not insane? One would hope so; but we cannot hurry to believe just what is most comfortable or kindest" (207). Refusing to let his readers position Lalaurie as a Gothic madwoman and thus plug her into a familiar narrative structure, Cable pushes back from literary romanticism into the realm of realism and its attendant political and social critiques.

We end "The ‘Haunted House' in Royal Street" with ghosts and music, an echo of Tintin Calandro's violin-playing for the ghosts. Cable the narrator enters the house after its repurposing as conservatory for musicians and passes along a remark by a visitor that the house has been "for the second time purged of its iniquities" (232). Cable notes grimly that he could not tell whether this speaker was a White League sympathizer referring to the purging of students of color from the school or a Radical Republican recalling the ransacking of the Lalaurie's torture closets to free imprisoned slaves (232). After pointing out for the reader the ambiguities of the speaker's reference, Cable notes that as music wafts through the old dining room of Madame Lalaurie,

> the ghosts were all there, walking on the waves of harmony. And thickest and fastest they trooped in and out when a passionate song thrilled the air with the promise that
>
> "Some day – some day
> Eyes clearer grown the truth may see." (232)

While the ghosts who haunt the St. Louis Cemetery in *Fernando de Lemos* point quite directly to a particular truth – the truth of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ – the ghosts that sing through Cable's short story remain ambiguous about the nature of the truth that "eyes clearer grown" might eventually see. Given what we know of Cable's racial politics and the story's masterful juxtaposition of Gothic horror story with postbellum political realism, we might conjecture that this truth will be the truth of a universal racial harmony.

My intervention in this chapter has been threefold: (1) to demonstrate how despite their differing hermeneutic horizons, Charles Gayarré and George Washington Cable both conceived of truth not as an object "out there" to be readily accessed but as a reality that one can make sense out of by approaching it within a matrix of pre-existing commitments and ideas; (2) to argue that the Creole controversy dramatizes what kinds of misreadings and anxieties about the interpretation of local color occur when these matrices of meaning are not fully articulated or when they differ between author and audience; and (3) to demonstrate how in local color we find ourselves in the brackish waters where the streams of literary romanticism and literary realism converge. As such this chapter speaks to the larger argument of this dissertation as a whole about the representation of forms of local knowledge within local color literature and disputes over the proper ways to construct these representations. The following chapter will take up these questions from the perspectives of readers rather than authors, paying attention to the ways in which tourist literature such as brochures, pamphlets, and guidebooks sought to provide a space where visitors could "authenticate" the real-life versions of venues represented in local color literature and thus prove or disprove for themselves the truths of the narratives they read.

CHAPTER TWO – [TRANSLATIONS]
Untranslated Passages: Lafcadio Hearn, New Orleans Guidebooks, and the Creole Sublime

> THE CHIMERA
> O thou Unknown, I am enamoured of thine eyes! Like a hyena in heat I turn about thee, soliciting those fecundations whereof the desires devour me!
>
> Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*; trans. Lafcadio Hearn (1874; 1882)

> There is something unutterable in the bright Gulf-air that compels awe, – something vital, something holy, something pantheistic: and reverentially the mind asks itself if what the eye beholds is not the πνεῦμα indeed, the Infinite Breath, the Divine Ghost, the great Blue Soul of the Unknown.
>
> Lafcadio Hearn, *Chita, A Memory of Last Island* (1888)

Let us open with a vignette from the midpoint of Lafadio Hearn's career in New Orleans, a vignette that contains motifs that will recur throughout this chapter concerning local color literature's playful preoccupation with translation and its limits. Late summer of 1883 found Hearn laboring over a number of projects. Fresh from his success finding a publisher for his English translation of Théophile Gautier's *One of Cleopatra's Nights and Other Fantastic Romances*, Hearn split his time between European and Creole Francophone translation projects (Cott 135). Writing to his friend the music critic H.E. Krehbiel, Hearn explains that encouragement from Harper's and Scribner's publishing houses regarding his collection of Creole proverbs – later published as *Gumbo Zhèbes* (1885) – is tempered by publishers' lack of sympathy for another of his literary ventures. "Another failure," laments Hearn, "was the translation of Flaubert's 'Temptation of Saint Anthony,' which no good publisher seems inclined to undertake. The original is certainly one of the most exotically strange pieces of writing in any language, and weird beyond description" (Bisland 278). Flaubert's sprawling closet drama *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874) – with a surreal cast of deities, monsters, mythical beasts, and historical persons worthy of a painting by Bosch or Bruegel the Elder – seems similar enough to the other projects that absorbed Hearn's attention. Its reliance on esoterica dovetails

nicely with Hearn's simultaneous collecting of stories "from all sorts of queer sources – the Sanscrit [*sic*], Buddhist, Talmudic, Persian, Polynesian, Finnish literatures, etc." (Bisland 278). Likewise the aesthetic commitments of the French Decadence that fueled the work of the Symbolists and the Parnassists and that inspired Flaubert's play can be found as well in Hearn's own work. Both confront the unknown, the sphinx-like, those concepts the sheer vastness of which places them in the realm of mystery and impenetrability. In Flaubert's vision-drama, Saint Anthony hears the Chimera yearning with unequivocal lust after the Sphinx, addressing it as "thou Unknown" and linking the sexual desires the Sphinx elicits to its very unknowability (182). Hearn, in his novella *Chita, A Memory of Last Island* (1888), describes the metaphysical attraction of the unknown as represented by the atmosphere of the Gulf of Mexico, an air that he links to the *pneuma* of the Greek translation of the Old Testament (*ruach* in the Hebrew of Genesis) – the breath-spirit of God that hovers over the primordial waters (12). Crafting an aesthetics for representing and translating this unknown to the page, however, becomes a challenge within the context of Hearn's Louisianan literary output and within the context of local color literature as a whole insofar as the mode requires a balancing of romantic impulses with ethnographic and geographic desires. Hearn, like so many local color writers, sought to present to his readers regional spaces at once familiar and mysterious, knowable and unknowable.

One space where we see this more direct confrontation between knowability and unknowability at work in Hearn's writing is in his use of and resistance to translation. In considering Hearn's work from his New Orleanian and Caribbean period (1877-1890), it is fruitful to examine how often he worked with translation, not simply in the traditional sense of rendering a work *tout ensemble* from one language to another (translating Flaubert's lapidary French into lapidary English) but also in more figurative senses of communicating cultural

information or subjective experiences across boundaries. Since translation presumes an inherent inability to present one with an exact copy of the source text, it also operates from the logic that to translate is invariably to leave out a vague, ill-defined, and almost mystical "something."

Given its confrontation with inherent limits, translation joins the quartet of hermeneutic problems – definitions, translations, mappings, and misreadings – this dissertation address in local color. Our consideration of translation here – or lack of translation, or inability to find an adequate translation – must emphasize its connections to the limitations of authorial expression and the limitations of readers' interpretations of a text. How much can authors rely upon readers' pre-existing knowledge bases to carry them through the text? What occurs on the level of reader reception when one encounters an untranslated or untranslatable passage? Hearn's approach to these limits pushes us further into spaces of both cultural and historical inscrutability. Readers of Hearn's own time grappled with reading about fascinating regions of "their world" through the local color fiction and travel writing published in national periodicals. Scholars of today returning to local color find ourselves at a temporal remove from these texts, one that tempts us towards utilizing historical data to reconstruct the context within which readers would have interpreted the objects of our study. Yet even at this level, we once again find ourselves as readers running up against the limitations of historicism as an interpretive tool.

Perhaps concerns about such readerly limitations contributed to publishers' cool reception of Hearn's translation of *The Temptations of Saint Anthony.* The drama relies heavily upon not just the trappings of the exotic but also upon the reader's possession of at least a rudimentary knowledge of dizzying references to such topics as second-century mystery cults of the Near East and the finer points of post-Nicaean Christian theological controversies. Though the major conceit of the text, the temptation of the third-century desert father Saint Anthony, is a common

theme in Western art, Flaubert's treatment makes specific references to obscure controversies and sects beyond the more familiar heresies of Gnosticism and Arianism. Flaubert's Saint Anthony finds himself "horrified by the blasphemies of Elkes, Corpocrates, Valentinus, Manes, Cerdo, – disgusted by the perversions of the Paternians, Marcosians, Montanists, Serptians, – bewildered by the apocryphal Gospels of Eve and of Judas, of the Lord, and of Thomas" (3). With its delving into such theological and mythological esoterica, its diversions into the realms of alchemy and gymnosophistical asceticism, and its abundant references to the early history of Eastern Christianity, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* is byzantine in more ways than one.

Yet this arcana that puzzled Hearn's American publishers – and still puzzles readers of Flaubert's enigmatic work – well might have been the very aspect of the *Temptation* that attracted Hearn as a translator. The at times overwhelming and often surreal imagery certainly accords with the style of an author who claimed to be striving in his art to "woo the Muse of the Odd" (Bisland 291). Though clearly the project represents a dramatically different literary enterprise than that of American local color literature, Hearn's translation of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* might represent a kind of limit-case of literary impenetrability. While the fiction of George Washington Cable, Kate Chopin, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, with its steady interplay between familiarization and de-familiarization, still remained palatable to its audience through its reliance on a set of regional tropes to situate the reader, Flaubert's drama plunges readers into a surreal and nightmarish space of nearly unrelenting chaos and confusion. We, like Anthony, are subject to an ever-shifting and ever-transforming vision that presents itself, fittingly enough for a temptation, as simultaneously alluring and threatening. Hearn's attraction to this piece hints at his tendency to push further into the realm of the inexplicable and the impenetrable than either Cable or Dunbar-Nelson. Of course, we must also take into account that Hearn, ever-fascinatined with

the "odd" and the "queer," produces a local color with markedly more exotic content – in both historical and geographical terms – than the other writers who constituted the literary community of late-nineteenth century Louisiana.

This chapter puts Hearn's well-attested attraction to the arcane, the esoteric, and the untranslatable into conversation with the operation of local knowledge in American regionalist writing. In doing so, it raises the stakes regarding the limits of the interpretation of local color writing. As we saw in Chapter One, Cable witholds an easy communication of local knowledges in *The Grandissimes* to place the reader in similar positions as the outsider Frowenfeld. As we will see in Chapter Three, Dunbar-Nelson withholds the racial backgrounds of her characters to create short stories in which the reader must make peace with the narrative's unsolvable riddles. What follows in this chapter is the argument that Lafcadio Hearn's Louisiana writings confront the limits of translation and do so both on the levels of form and content. Hearn's novel *Chita, A Memory of Last Island* and his earlier prose about New Orleans such as "At the Gates of the Tropics" (1877) work double-duty, translating Creole culture for readers while calling attention both formally and thematically to that which gets "left out" of any translation. At work in Hearn's writing is a poetics of inscrutability. Inscrutability here indicates not only a romantic impulse towards de-familiarization and exoticism but also speaks to larger epistemological questions about the limits of human understanding itself. Like the works of Cable and Gayarré, these texts formally enact and dramatize for readers the very epistemological question that informs their narrative content. One striking aspect of Hearn's case is that the literary impulse towards a poetics of inscrutability also influenced his work in the collaborative production of New Orleans guidebooks, publications that communicated information about the city of New Orleans to tourists while simultaneously conjuring an aura of mystery around the city as a site of

experiences incommensurable with language. Study of these guidebooks provides significant insights into the ways the epistemological concerns of local color fiction operated within other genres with (ostensibly) more practical purposes.

The first section of this chapter will argue that the untranslated passages (from Spanish, Creole French, Parisian French, Italian, Greek, and Latin) in Hearn's novel *Chita* serve as a means to submerge the reader into a narrative space of strategic inscrutability. Thus the passages in multiple languages we find throughout *Chita* operate not just as ethnographic touches to add local flavor and contribute to the exoticism of the text as perceived by its readers but also echo on a formal level the thematic preoccupations of the novel with the limitations of knowledge. This move blends realism's ethnographic detail with the impulse of literary romanticism towards the human encounter with the mysterious and the incomprehensible. The creolization here occurs on both the levels of literary form (the foreign languages and dialects used in the text) and literary mode (local color's blending of realism and romanticism). The second part of this chapter will trace a similar move towards the limits of translatability, understood more figuratively, in selections from Hearn's other New Orleans writings, particularly "At the Gates of the Tropics." There Hearn's attempt to verify the location of the tree mentioned in Thomas Bailey Aldrich's local color story "Père Antoine's Date Palm" leads him to grapple with the limits to which one can verify realistic elements in fiction. It forces him to confront as well as the untranslatability of fictional experiences into lived reality. This concern with the disconnect between the world created within the text and the world of lived experience (conditioned and informed by the world of the text) leads into this chapter's third and final section on New Orleans guidebook culture. Borrowing from local color, these guidebooks participate in the practical project of rendering the city manageable and navigable by tourists and outsiders while simultaneously participating in the

aesthetic project of strategically emphasizing the inscrutability of the city for tourists. Strikingly, as will be seen in the *Picayune*'s *A Little Guide to New Orleans: What to See and How to See It* (1892), such moments of strategic inscrutability occasionally move beyond simply reinforcing stereotypes of New Orleans as a site of exoticism and mystery, consciously avoiding the standard tropes associated with the space and disrupting accepted and expected regionalist imagery.

Lafcadio Hearn's Chita *and the Creole Sublime*

If the twentieth-century Southern writer Walker Percy's claim for a theory of the human person as the constant pilgrim holds true, then Lafcadio Hearn's life would serve as a paradigmatic example of man as *homo viator*. Born on the Greek island of Lefkada in the Ionian Sea, sent off to Dublin to live with his father's relatives after the death of his mother, and eventually pressured by these same unsympathetic paternal connections to leave Ireland for the levees of Cincinnati, Hearn came to New Orleans as yet another station on his life's journey – one that would eventually take him further south onto the Caribbean island of Martinique and then even further, into the East, to his final home in Japan. His work as a newspaperman in Cincinnati had given him a wide breadth of experiences, among them his tempestuous interracial marriage to Alethea "Mattie" Foley. The collapse of the marriage led Hearn southward to New Orleans, where he continued his literary and journalistic career by immersing himself in the city's African, French, Spanish, and Creole particularities. He also met and gained the assistance of George Washington Cable who – although likely puzzled by the bohemian nature of this one-eyed wanderer – shared his affection for folklore and local color. In his biography of Hearn, Jonathan Cott reports how "the two met up two or three nights a week to swap Creole poems and stories, then strolled through the Old Quarter to observe Creole street dancers and stop to listen

to many of the black singers, as Cable notated the melodies and Lafcadio wrote down the words" (156).

Cable came to Hearn's professional assistance by putting the Greek immigrant in touch with Northeastern editors and publishers, though the relationship between the two men deteriorated as Hearn began to perceive Cable as a rival, particularly when it came to the publication of works on the subject of Creole music (Cott 156). This, unfortunately, was a pattern in the life of the incredibly sensitive Hearn, whose relationships often ended when he distanced himself from formerly close friends in whom he perceived real or imagined signs of betrayal (Cott 151). Nevertheless, the initial introduction of Hearn to the world of the Northeastern periodical paid off. In April 1888, *Harper's Monthly* published Hearn's *Chita.* (A few months later, in the November issue, *Harper's* would publish another piece on south Louisiana, an article by the now-octogenarian but still productive Charles Gayarré on "The New Orleans Bench and Bar in 1823.") *Chita,* referred to in *Harper's Monthly* as a "novelette," was published in book form the following year by Harper and Brothers. The books section of the November 16, 1889, issue of the *New York Sun* published a series of glowing reviews by initial readers. The *New York Tribune* called it "Mr. Hearn's best performance thus far. His style is tropical, full of glow and swift movements and vivid impressions" (7). The *Salt Lake Herald* hailed Hearn as "the American Gautier" in the December 1, 1889, issue (6). James E. Kinsella in *The French Broad Hustler*, a North Carolina newspaper, praised Hearn in January 1905 as a "prince of polished prose" and called *Chita* a "story worthy of Victor Hugo's Titanesque imagination" (6). In fact, Hearn himself may have invited such comparisons to Hugo by including in print editions an untranslated epigraph from Hugo's "Océan" from *La Légende des Siècles*: "Je suis la vaste mêlée, — / Reptile, étant l'onde; ailée, / Étant le vent,— / Force et fuite,

haine et vie, / Houle immense, poursuivie / Et poursuivant"[12] (*Chita* 2). Though initially hailed by critics as a classic that ranked with the best achievements of American and European literature, *Chita* has only recently begun to receive renewed attention by scholars. Its multi-lingual play, its vivid depictions of multi-ethnic nineteenth-century American communities, and its philosophical heft make it an attractive text that deserves both the attention of Americanist scholars and incorporation into the classroom, where it might serve a variety of functions.[13]

The idea for the novella, which depicts the aftermath of a hurricane that hit Last Island (Isle Dernière), a barrier island in the Gulf of Mexico, came to Hearn after a discussion with Cable about the real 1856 hurricane that struck the island (Cott 193). On August 10, 1856, a storm (which we would now measure as a Category Four hurricane) made landfall in southeastern Louisiana, devastating several barrier islands including Last Island, which at the time was home to a popular resort for Southern white elite looking to avoid the "sickly season" of mosquitos and malaria. Today, no such island exists. Damage from storms, coastal erosion, and rising sea levels have divided the single island into various Isles Dernières – the Raccoon, Whiskey, Trinity, and East islands (Dixon 7). Hearn found in the hurricane's destruction of Last Island and the tragedy of the hundreds who died during the storm material attractive to his artistic purposes. In an 1886 letter to Krehbiel during the early stages of editing what would become *Chita,* Hearn rhapsodizes about the creation of a "poetical prose, the evolution of the Gnosticism of the New Art!" (Bisland 378). In the same letter, Hearn goes on to conceptualize his own prose aesthetic during the era of *Chita*'s composition:

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[12] "I am the vast melee, / Reptilian, being the wave; winged / Being the wind, / Strength and flight, hate and life / Immense swell, pursued / And pursuing."

[13] Students in a Caribbean Literature course I taught in the fall of 2015 found the text both challenging and rewarding. One student remarked that she considered *Chita* an example of an "American Creole" text that could be compared and contrasted fruitfully with texts that concerned themselves with Caribbean creolité.

> a poetical prose, compositions to satisfy an old Greek ear, like chants wrought in a huge measure, wider than the widest line of a Sanscrit [*sic*] composition, and just a little irregular, like Ocean-rhythm. I really think I will be able to realize it at last. And then, what? I really don't know. I fancy that I shall have produced a pleasant effect on the reader's mind, simply with pictures; and that the secret work, the word-work, will not be noticed for its own sake. It will be simply an eccentricity for critics. (379)

The link here between Gnosticism and the unnoticed "secret work" of artistic craft is reminiscent of the esoteric material included in Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. But it is also crucial to the thematic elements Hearn emphasizes in his novella with his formal choices – thematic elements that emphasize the limits of human understanding not only in terms of interpersonal communication but also in terms of human attempts to create a conceptual order to make sense of the natural world.

Almost one-third of *Chita* takes place outside the realm of traditional narrative structure. Of the main characters of the piece – the orphan girl Eulalie / Zouzoune / Chita, her father Julien La Brierre, or the Viosca couple – none appear in the first section of the novella, entitled "The Legend of *L'Île Dernière*." Instead, Hearn grants the lion's share of this first section to a description of the natural landscape around Last Island in a prose style similar to that of his travel writing. Yet to read this section as strictly travel writing would, I argue, miss the fact that the narrator of this first section is teaching us as readers how to read the remainder of the novella by setting up a variety of disorienting and dislocating moves. One of the early and relatively innocuous examples of this destabilizing of images comes when the narrator describes the sea-grasses that grow along the coastline:

> . . . you may see the tawny grasses all covered with something like husks, — wheat-colored husks, — large, flat, and disposed evenly along the lee-side of each swaying stalk, so as to present only their edges to the wind. But, if you approach, those pale husks all break open to display strange splendors of scarlet and seal-brown, with arabesque mottlings in white and black: they change into wondrous living blossoms, which detach themselves before your eyes and rise in air, and flutter away by thousands to settle down farther off, and turn into wheat-colored husks once more . . . a whirling flower-drift of

sleepy butterflies! (7)

De-familiarization of the landscape thus begins with the "husks" that clustered upon the sea grasses. As the narrator guides the reader through the passage, these "husks" become strange and alluring, opening to reveal multi-colored patches and "arabesque mottlings." Still the true nature of these "husks" remains withheld from the reader, though when they detach and "flutter" away, the reader may be closer to the realization of what these clusters actually are. In the final line of the passage, the answer comes – the husks are butterflies. More than merely a playful use of natural imagery to set the geographic scene, this passage prepares readers for a recurring concern of the novella – the instability of structures initially taken as givens and the mutability of a landscape that is ever-shifting, ever-unstable, ever-prepared to come apart and reconfigure itself in new formations. Such a move also trains the reader to be wary of her own initial interpretations of the text, since what appears to be stable, colorless, and motionless (the husks) may become capricious, multi-colored, and mobile (the butterflies). The experience of readers of *Chita* operates along the lines of Gadamer's theory in *Truth and Method* that a reader of any text must operate via a projection of fore-meanings onto a text as one reads it, fore-meanings that must be repeatedly and consistently revised with each new word that enters into the interpretation: "the initial meaning emerges only because he [the reader] is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there" (267). Gadamer goes on to argue that the working out of "appropriate projections . . . is the constant task of understanding. The only 'objectivity' here is the confirmation of a fore-meaning in its being worked out" (267). Fascinatingly enough in the context of this study of interpretative conflicts and dilemmas, Gadamer claims that misinterpretation arises out of an

inability or unwillingness to revise these projected fore-meanings in light of the totality of a text – a failure to remain open and "sensitive to the text's alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self" but, rather, allows the text "to present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings" (269).

Though innocent enough when it comes to monarch butterflies, the instability of the landscape becomes unsettling as the narrator moves us further into the Gulf of Mexico itself. In a move similar to the one he makes with the butterflies, Hearn describes the jellyfish of the gulf initially as "beautiful veined creatures that throb like hearts, with perpetual systole and diastole of their diaphanous envelops [sic]: some, of translucent azure or rose, seem in the flood the shadows or ghosts of huge campanulate flowers; — others have the semblance of strange living vegetables" (14-15), only revealing in the final line of the paragraph the identity of these creatures as jellyfish. The unknownness, the strangeness of the ocean becomes more terrifying when Hearn encourages the reader to imagine herself as a swimmer feeling unseen tentacles and underwater creatures brushing past her before setting foot down upon "something heavy, swift, lithe, that rushes past with a swirling shock. Then the fear of the Abyss, the vast and voiceless Nightmare of the Sea, will come upon you; the silent panic of all those opaline millions that flee glimmering by will enter you also" (15). Here Hearn reinforces the move made throughout this first section – the insistence upon the de-centering of the human person in the midst of a mysterious, unpredictable, and fluctuating natural environment.

This de-centering comes to a head when the hurricane finally strikes the island, disrupting the ornate and organized ball, replacing the ordered waltzes of the dancers at the Last Island resort with the chaotic careening of the elements. Hearn gives us background on the structures

that define the social world of the attendees: "affiliated by blood, connaturalized by caste, or simply interassociated by traditional sympathies of class sentiment and class interest" (25). Yet the niceties of socioeconomic structure collapse in the face of the chaos of the storm. Berlioz's variation on Weber's *L'Invitation à la Valse* is paired alongside the wind's "stupendous Valse-Tourbillon! O the mighty Dancer! One—two—three! From northeast to east, from east to southeast, from southeast to south: then from the south he [the Wind] came, whirling the Sea in his arms" (27). The waltz of the sea with the wind that creates the hurricane soon destabilizes the geography of Last Island, disrupting the boundary lines between sea and land as water rushes in to flood the ballroom. When a band of thieves arrives the next morning to rob the corpses of the dead who float in the water of the Gulf, their violent treatment of the corpses of the rich points to the instability of social boundaries lines; the narrator assures one graverobber, "Her betrothal ring will not come off, Giuseppe, but the delicate bone snaps easily: your oyster-knife can sever the tendon . . . And it is not your quadroon bondsmaid, sweet lady, who now disrobes you so roughly; those Malay hands are less deft than hers" (32).

Hearn aims at a larger message here beyond merely the naturalist point that human structures of race, class, and economic status mean so little in the fact of nature's magnitude, a theme reminiscent of Stephen Crane's work. By de-centering the human, he also seeks to emphasize the incomprehensibility of the natural world and its resistance to interpretation. "Nature," cries the narrator, "incomprehensible Sphinx!" (17). The treatment of the storm as nature's ur-chaos lays the foundation for later concerns over the limit-points at which the characters in *Chita*, and the readers of the text itself, find themselves blocked in their attempts to give order to not only the vastness of the natural world but also the human-scale questions of language and interpersonal communication.

While the first section of *Chita* de-centers the human actors, recounting the storm via narrative moves that seem to look both backward towards Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* and forward to twenty-first century discussions of non-anthropocentric conceptions of the world, the remaining sections ("Out of the Sea's Strength" and "The Shadow of the Tide") follow a more traditional narrative structure. Rescued from the storm by the fisherman Feliu Viosca and tended to by Feliu's wife Carmen, the young girl Eulalie La Brierre is adopted by the Spanish couple and raised for years in their humble residence on the Gulf Coast. The dialogue of Feliu and Carmen is rendered, as is often the case in local color writing, initially in Spanish and then with an accompanying translation in English for the sake of the reader – rather than in footnotes at the bottom of the page. (As an important note: The initial version of *Chita* published in *Harper's* does not include any additional translations other than those offered by Hearn as a running part of the text itself. Later versions, such as the University Press of Mississippi edition, incorporate footnoted translations for those passages that Hearn does not provide in-line translation for). At times, the narrator even steps in to offer commentary on his own translation of the dialogue. For instance, when Feliu and Carmen find the Gulf waters rushing into their home, the dialogue is rendered in the following fashion:

> With a scream Carmen aroused Feliu. He raised himself upon his elbow, rubbed his eyes, and asked her, with exasperating calmness, "*¿Qué tienes? ¿qué tienes?*" (What ails thee?)
>
> — "Oh, Feliu! the sea is coming upon us!' she answered, in the same tongue. But she screamed out a word inspired by her fear: she did not cry, *"¡Se nos viene el mar encima!*" but "*¡Se nos viene LA ALTURA!*" – the name that conveys the terrible thought of depth swallowed up in height, — the height of the *high sea*. (39)

Here we find a fascinating riff on the standard local color move of the narrator offering a more digestible rendering of foreign language or dialect for the reader. Hearn does not initially translate the lines themselves – leaving readers unfamiliar with Spanish likely able to make out

the general sense of the words via the clues of its context (i.e. What are the likely things one cries out as water floods one's home?) but perhaps unable to make out Spanish words like *encima* even if *nos* and *viene* and *mar* remain close enough to Latin roots to be decipherable by those who have basic familiarity with Romance languages. Most fascinating, however, is Hearn's commentary on his own translation of Carmen Viosca's Spanish. He renders first the literal Spanish back-translation of his own line of English dialogue: "*¡Se nos viene el mar encima!*" (39). He then notes that Carmen has actually uttered a substantially different phrase, substituting the words *the height* for *the sea*: "*¡Se nos viene LA ALTURA!*" (39). This signifies an early warning for readers that the dialogue that follows in the rest of the novella is being consciously filtered and translated by a narrative voice that often finds its own translations incommensurate with the utterances of the non-Anglophone characters. It suggests as well the fact that informs any approach to translation, that a completely commensurate, accurate, and definitive translation is an impossibility. This passage also – in its spatial confusion of the sensation of depth with height, participates in the destabilizing impulse of Hearn's aesthetics, one that treats the sea as a mystery that unsettles human attempts at adequate description or representation in language.

Local color literature, particularly that which takes south Louisiana for its setting, often calls attention to a narrative voice's insufficiency in translating the "real" language spoken by characters. The variety not only of mother tongues (French, English, Spanish) but of specific dialects of these tongues (Creole French, Cajun French, Afro-Creole) made nineteenth-century Louisiana a rich space for writers looking not only to depict American linguistic diversity but also to depict the complications that stem from attempts at cross-linguistic communication. The way Hearn handles Feliu and Carmen's dialogue during the storm echoes similar linguistic moves made by Kate Chopin in her short story "La Belle Zoraïde" from the collection *Bayou*

Folk (1894). Most of the story consists of Manna Loulou, the black maidservant to the young Madame Delisle, recounting a tale to her mistress of an enslaved mother separated from her child. Though Manna Loulou's story includes snatches of Creole dialect when she mentions dialogue between characters, her narrative voice is rendered by Chopin in standard English: "Madame had hoped, in thus depriving Zoraïde of her child, to have her young waiting-maid again at her side free, happy, and beautiful as of old" (315). Yet at the end of "La Belle Zoraïde," we find this peculiar passage as Manna Loulou and Madame Delisle exchange their final words before retiring to bed:

> "Are you asleep, Ma'zélle Titite?"
> "No, I am not asleep; I was thinking. Ah, the poor little one, Man Loulou, the poor little one! better had she died!"
> But this is the way Madame Delisle and Manna Loulou really talked to each other: —
> "Vou pré droumi, Ma'zélle Titite?"
> "Non, pa pré droumi; mo yapré zongler. Ah, la pauv' piti, Man Loulou. La pauv' piti! Mieux li mouri!" (317)

Thus the final passage of the story reminds the reader that the tale has come to them via a triple-mediation: first from the character of Manna Loulou to the character of Madame Delisle, second by the narrator of "La Belle Zoraïde" who recounts Manna Loulou's story, and third by the narrator's translation of not only Loulou's story but the entire dialogue between Loulou and Delisle from Creole French into standard English. This is a separate phenomenon entirely from the use of dialect forms of English in local color to indicate a speaker's ethnic background (eg. what Cable does for Creoles like Raoul Innerarity from *The Grandissimes*, with his painting of "Louisiana Rif-Using to Hanter de h-Union").

Gavin Jones, in *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded-Age America*, approaches this kind of linguistic play in local color texts as a way to discuss the entanglement and circulation of power and language in nineteenth-century America (11). Such considerations,

though certainly important, do not exhaust the methods by which we can approach dialect literature. While Jones's model (operating from a *de facto* Foucauldian approach) concerns itself with language as a means of reinforcing power structures, this chapter seeks to explore other fascinating approaches to the ways language is rendered in regionalist literature – approaches that take into account impenetrability, unknowability, and the limitations of literary representation and interpretation. Particularly in the example of Chopin's "La Belle Zoraïde," we see the narrator herself stepping back from local color concerns with regional realism and ethnography to admit that the literary text cannot adequately convey on an orthographic level the speech of its characters and must of necessity leave the reader with a gap between the imagined "real" dialogue and the representation of that dialogue by the narrative voice. By approaching the short story from this angle, we get at another set of tensions present in the text in addition to those tensions that have to do with racial and linguistic power structures and hierarchies.

This scene between Manna Loulou and Madame Delisle calls our attention – much like Hearn does in *Chita* – not only to translation as a linguistic phenomenon that confronts the limits of expression but to larger thematics of misunderstanding. In the passage quoted above, the white woman Delisle interprets and offers her commentary on the events in Loulou's story, events deeply ingrained in the legacies of antebellum chattel slavery. Yet Delisle seems not to entirely grasp the import of Loulou's tale, venturing the conclusion that it would have been better for "the poor little one" to die, either referring to Zoraïde (who ends the tale consumed by madness) or her child, spirited away from her to a neighboring plantation. Either alternative, though sentimentalized and relying on a standard convention of romanticism (death rather than X), might strike twenty-first century readers as jarring insofar as a white woman comments upon which black lives might be better off not existing. Similar patterns of interpersonal confusion,

lack of connection, and misunderstanding appear in Hearn's novella as well. Aesthetic decisions made by Hearn and Chopin about how to approach translated passages resonate with the broader thematic concerns of their fictions. Not only do we find literal translation from language to language fraught with difficulty – we also gain an appreciation for the limits and difficulties that human beings face when attempting to translate lived experiences to one another.

Hearn dramatizes this broader interpersonal confusion between members of the post-hurricane Viosca family. As the narrative of *Chita* unfolds, we find the adopted Eulalie – renamed Chita by the Vioscas after their deceased daughter Conchita – struggling not only with linguistic barriers but the cultural barriers that exist between her and her adopted parents. Though Chita knows how to speak French from her bourgeois upbringing in New Orleans and therefore how to recite her prayers in French, Carmen begins instructing the child in Castilian under the belief that her prayers will be more acceptable to God in Spanish:

> the child would kneel beside her, with little hands joined, and in a voice sweet and clear murmur something she had learned by heart. Much as this pleased Carmen, it seemed to her that the child's prayers could not be wholly valid unless uttered in Spanish; — for Spanish was heaven's own tongue, — *la lengua de Dios*, *el idioma de Dios*; and she resolved to teach her to say the *Salve María* and the *Padre Neustro* in Castillian. (70)

The narrative voice itself calls for a clear correlation between this literal translation work that Chita and her new parents must undertake and the translation (archaic meaning: travel) that Chita has undergone in moving from the city to the coast: "What had she lost by her swift translation from the dusty existence of cities to the open immensity of nature's freedom? What did she gain?" (79). Here translation (travel) becomes the impetus and catalyst for translation (linguistic). Similar to other dislocated characters in local color fiction, Chita's shift to a new geographical space requires a shift as well in her modes of thinking, speaking, and approaching

the world. What is required of her is a shift in thought as much as a shift in language and geography.

Race complicates these translations when Chita tells her adoptive mother that she will not offer prayers before Carmen's statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe – "she wanted to say her prayers to a *white* Virgin; Carmen's Señora de Guadalupe was only a *negra!*" Carmen responds in a way that reinforces Hearn's thematic emphasis on ineffability:

> Then, for the first time, Carmen spoke so crossly to the child as to frighten her. But the pious woman's heart smote her the next moment for that first harsh word; — and she caressed the motherless one, consoled her, cheered her, and at last explained to her— I know not how— something very wonderful about the little figurine, something that made Chita's eyes big with awe. Thereafter she always regarded the Virgin of Wax as an object mysterious and holy. (72)

The narrative voice pulls back from offering omniscient knowledge; the mysterious aspect of the statue becomes even more mysterious in Hearn's treatment of it and becomes for us as readers just as much an object of fascination and wonder as it becomes for Chita herself. This mystery also transcends and transforms what could have been little more than an opportunity for Carmen to offer Chita a neat and tidy lesson on racial sensitivity. That the racial aspects of the statue become subsumed within a kind of supernatural numinousness indicates that Hearn aims at a metaphysical point here as well as a racial-political one.

As she ages, Chita begins to approach religious questions more substantive than the race of the Virgin Mary. After Carmen tells her that her real mother has died – a revelation prompted by Chita's encounter with the ruins of a sepulchre in the swamp – Chita begins to reimagine her vision of God, who formerly had existed for her as a simple storybook concept. Her initial imaginings of the deity pull from saccharine French devotionals, with their "quaint" pictures of the Creation of the world and the great waters above which presides a God "like old Doctor de Coulanges, who used to visit the house" (77). As she develops theologically through her girlhood

and adolescence, Chita's encounter with the sublime and the mysterious leads her to an image of God far more ineffable, a blend of the *mysterium fascinans* and the *mysterium tremendum*:

> The awful bearded face, the huge shadowy hand, did not fade from her thought; but they became fantastically blended with the larger and vaguer notion of something that filled the world and reached to the stars, — something diaphanous and incomprehensible like the invisible air, omnipresent and everlasting like the high blue of heaven…. (77)

Chita's understanding of an ineffable and incomprehensible God parallels her relationship with the sea as well as Hearn's treatment of the sea throughout the novella. In fact the sea becomes the one part of the coastal landscape that Chita remains unable to comfortably interpret as well as she does the details of sea-bird habits, how pelicans fish, and how to tell changes in the weather. As she grows even more complex in her theological musings, Chita begins to fear the ocean and view it as "the one Power which God could not make to obey Him as He pleased" (83). Even her pious recitation of the Nicene Creed, with its claim that God the Father is the creator of heaven and earth, cannot shake this unease with the sea's place in the natural order:

> Saying the creed one day, she repeated very slowly the opening words, — *"Creo en un Dios, padre todopoderoso, Criador de cielo y la tierra,"* – and paused and thought. *Creator of Heaven and Earth?* "Madrecita Carmen," she asked, — *"¿quién entonces hizó el mar?"* (who then made the sea?). (83)

Thus Chita encounters the sublime through her marveling at the incomprehensible ocean, the natural wonder that remains resistant to easy categorization within her mind. The ocean remains resistant to representation even in the language of prayer (insofar as the Nicene Creed elides mention of the ocean in its claim for God the Father's creative act). Ironically, Chita's approach to the Creed in her new language, Spanish, leads her not to fuller knowledge of the creation story she had learned in French but only into deeper ambiguity and confusion. Translation here does not clarify but darken. Though eventually, after Feliu teaches her how to swim, Chita approaches the sea with steadily decreasing fear, the narrator offers us as readers a warning regarding the

ineffability of the ocean, the "Primordial Sea, the awfulness of whose antiquity hath stricken all mythology dumb" (86). One might fruitfully compare Chita's ambivalent relationship to the ocean with that of Chopin's Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, who finds in the sea both a space of sensual delight and terror, of seduction and of incomprehensibility.

Working alongside this romantic appeal to the incomprehensibility of the sublime, we also find in Hearn's novella ethnographic treatments of incomprehension as characters' dialects and languages prevent clear communication and adequate translation. One of the set pieces of the book, the translation scene in which a group of men gather in the Viosca house and attempt to discover which language the recently-rescued Eulalie (not yet renamed Chita) speaks incorporates this confusion to fine dramatic effect. What makes this scene particularly remarkable is the denial to the reader (in the original *Harper's* publication) of any paratextual apparatus to offer insight into the back-and-forth dialogue. Prior to the gathering, as a kind of overture to the translation discussion itself, the narrator informs us that even Feliu's account of his rescue of the girl from the post-storm wreckage cannot be adequately conveyed to his hearers but has to be relayed by a better-traveled and better linguistically-versed Mateo. Yet this account results only in a further "confusion of questions" (52). After Captain Harris admits that he cannot interpret the girl's background from her attire and can find "no clew to the identity of this child," he yields to the room of sailors, fishermen, and travelers to determine which language she speaks (53). English is an immediate dead-end. German and Italian are offered to no avail. Feliu, despite Harris's endorsement as one "who talks nearly all the infernal languages spoken down this way, says he can't make her understand him" (54). Finally it falls to Laroussel, a French Creole, to – as Harris puts it – "Talk *gumbo* to her!" (54). Before he can do so, Harris launches one last potshot

at the German doctor and the Italian sailor: "I've no doubt this child knows German very well, and Italian too . . . but not in the way you gentlemen pronounce it!" (54).

Then Laroussel stoops to Chita, who the narrative voice suggests might recognize in him via "the first embryonic feeling of race-affinity. . . . some intuitive, inexplicable sense of kindred" (54). What follows remained untranslated in the original edition, leaving readers to piece together the French Creole dialect as best they could from a knowledge of schoolroom French. I have included a running translation in the footnotes, and many editions of the novella now include translations of the following lines, rendered in the original like so:

> — "*Fais moin bo, piti*."
> She pouted up her pretty lips and kissed his black moustache.
> He spoke to her again:—
> — "*Dis moin to nom, piti; — dis moin to nom, chère.*"
> Then for the first time, she spoke, answering in her argent treble:
> — "*Zouzoune.*"
> All held their breath. Captain Harris lifted his finger to his lips to command silence.
> — "Zouzoune? Zouzoune qui, chère?"
> — "Zouzoune, ça c'est moin, Lili!"
> — "C'est pas tout to nom, Lili; — dis moin, chère, to laut nom."
> — "Mo pas connin laut nom."
> — "Comment yé té pélé to maman, piti?"
> — "Maman, —Maman 'Dèle."
> — "Et comment yé té pélé to papa, chère?"
> — "Papa Zulien."
> — "Bon! Et comment to maman té péle to papa? — dis ça à moin, chère?"
> The child looked down, put a finger in her mouth, thought a moment, and replied: —
> — "Li pélé li, 'Chéri'; li pélé li, 'Papoute.'"
> — "Aïe, aïe!— c'est tout, ça? —to maman té jamain pélé li daut' chose?"
> — "Mo pas connin, moin."[14]

The exchange continues for another several lines, but this massive block of text should indicate how heavily Hearn relies upon the reader's patience to proceed through uncompromising

[14] "Give me a kiss, little one." / "Tell me your name, little one. Tell me your name, dear." / "Zouzoune." / "Zouzoune? Zouzoune what, dear?" / "Zouzoune, that's me! Lili!" / That's not your whole name, Lili. Tell me, dear, your other name." / "I don't know another name." / "What did you call your mama, little one?" / "Mama. Mama 'Dele." / "And what did you call your papa, dear?" / "Papa Zulien." / "Good! And what did your mama call your papa? Tell me that, dear." / "She called him, 'Dear,'; she called him Little Papa." / "Yeah. Yeah. Is that all, then? Your mother never called him something else?" / "I don't know."

foreignness. Even a reader with a modicum of French might not be able to access Creole words such as *laut* or might confuse the Creole *moin* (my) for the Parisian French *moins* (less). Even if Hearn could expect that his French-literate readers might piece together the scene via context clues, the vast majority of Hearn's original readers in *Harper's* would have found before them an impenetrable translation scene – a translation scene without translation. Once more we find a local colorist utilizing authorial decisions to intentionally block readers from accessing local knowledge and in doing so putting them in the position of characters who share this lack of knowledge. This occurs much in the same way that Chopin positions us outside of an intimate two-person discussion in "La Belle Zoraïde," with her final note that her readers have only been given a rough translation of the characters' dialogue. In the translation scene of *Chita*, we stand with Feliu and the others who cannot comprehend the "gumbo" dialect of French that Laroussel and Eulalie/Zouzoune/Lili/Chita share.

Such an aesthetic move, and one sustained for such an extended section of the narrative, is a radical decision worthy of a Modernist like Ezra Pound, and we might consider here a rare link between the allegedly dichotomous aesthetics of local color and High Modernism insofar as both concern themselves with the instability of shared meanings. These untranslated passages we find in Hearn's translation scene are not mere ethnographic window-dressing but are crucial for his thematic and aesthetic goals in *Chita.* The reader, as one who lacks the necessary knowledge to enter into characters' conversations (for example, the one between Laroussel and Eulalie), must confront in her own reading of the text the very thematic tensions the novella seems preoccupied with – the instability and impenetrability of meaning. When Eulalie's father Julien, who has also survived the storm but been separated from his daughter, recovers in New Orleans, he discovers his wife's gravestone (marked in French). We as readers, even if we can only piece

together the French inscription, know that the translation will not give us the truth of the matter – for the gravestone also gives us the information that Julien and Eulalie are both dead, while both are still alive. When Julien leaves New Orleans to provide medical assistance to an invalid on the coast, he ends up meeting Eulalie (now Chita) but succumbs to yellow fever before he can pursue his identification of her. Even in their brief conversation, they navigate linguistic differences incredibly well, moving from French to Spanish quite fluidly. Yet this ease with language does not transfer the key piece of information they need to reunite with each other; Julien remains silent regarding his suspicions that she is his lost Eulalie. The novella ends with Julien, nursed by Carmen Viosca, dying in uncertainty as to whether or not his daughter survived the hurricane. As he dies, his speech becomes a hodgepodge of various languages:

> "Perhaps I think I know; — but I do not—do not know justly, fully—how like! . . . *¡Si! ¡es el vómito!—¡yo lo conozco, Carmen!* . . . She must not die twice . . . I died twice . . . I am going to die again. She only once. Till the heavens be no more she will not rise . . . . *Moi, au contraire, il faut que je me lève toujours!* They need me so much;— the slate is always full, the bell will never stop. They will ring that bell for me when I am dead . . . . So will I rise again!—*resurgam!*" (107)

In the final passages of the novella, Spanish, French, and even Latin in the word *resurgam* ("I shall rise again") mingle together. Julien's own thoughts become feverish and torturous and are compared by the narrative voice to the confusion and incomprehensibility of the ocean: "Weirdly the past became confounded with the present; impressions of sigh and of sound interlinked in fantastic affinity . . . a darkness that surged and moaned, as the circumfluence of a shadowed sea" (108). Julien confuses the praying Carmen for his dead wife Adèle and wonders why she recites the Catholic "Ignatian aspirations" (often called the *Anima Christi* after its first lines) in Spanish rather than in French. The novella ends in a confusion of storm and surreal images as Carmen, "kneeling at the feet of the dead, cries out, alone in the night:— '*¡O Jesus misericordioso!— ¡tened compasión de él!*" (110). This final line, in the original *Harper's*

publication, remained untranslated and without footnote. Though we might imagine readers familiar with Romance languages were able to piece together "merciful Jesus," the tense issues at work in "*tened compasión de él*" might be hard going for non-Spanish speakers who, while they could identify "compassion" might not be able to fully grasp the meaning of the expression. Even in the 2003 University Press of Mississippi edition of *Chita*, which includes extensive footnotes, the actual meaning of the phrase is rendered incorrectly in English. "*¡Tened compasión de él!*" is an imperative statement: "Have compassion for him" or even more roughly "Have mercy on him!" / "Take pity on him!" Yet the Mississippi edition footnotes this line as "Oh merciful Jesus!—you had compassion for him!" The variations in this translation are not minor issues. Whether we take Carmen's expression to be a prayerful plea for Christ to have mercy on the departing soul of Julien (and, thus, an imperative statement) or her evaluation of the post-mortem situation (i.e. "Christ had mercy on him; He let him die rather than suffer") ends the novella on markedly different notes. Here we can see quite clearly the practical difficulties of interpretation these untranslated passages (and at times even their attempted translations in later footnotes) raise for readers. All of these interpretive difficulties point back to the central claim of this chapter – that the illegibility or inadequacy of translation is part of the aesthetic experience of these texts and that in our struggles to piece together meaning in the face of opacity, we find ourselves not only in the linguistic position of the sailors gathered around Eulalie during the translation scene but also in the metaphysical position of Chita herself, looking out to the ocean as a space of natural and supernatural mystery.

Translating the City, Translating Experience: Lafcadio Hearn and Père Antoine's Date Palm

While the preceding section considered translation from a literal angle – the attempt to render words and sentences from one language into another language – this section approaches

translation in a more figurative and playful sense, returning to the word's etymological roots in spatiality. To be translated was to be carried (*latus*) across (*trans*). In fact its earliest uses in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries often connoted the actual movement of bishops from one episcopal see to another. By the sixteenth century, John Lyly in his *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* was still using *translate* to mean physical movement: "plante and tranſlate the crabbe tree, where, and whenſoever it pleaſe you, and it wyll neuer beare ſweete Apple, vnleſſe you graft it by Arte, which nothing toucheth nature" (41). Trees and translation function as well in the analysis that follows, though instead of Lyly's apple tree, this section will consider Lafcadio Hearn's relationship with a date palm tree. It will use Hearn's *agon* with the putative reality of this tree to argue that his travel writing about the city of New Orleans demonstrates anxieties about the translation of fictional experiences into lived reality – how to recreate and carry over, as it were, those local elements represented in travel writing into a lived experience. Within the context of local color literature, these elements often became means for readerships to "verify" the truth of those regional details mentioned within both fictional texts and other pieces of travel writing. This section will argue that the negotiation of this disconnect, the disconnect between the textual world and the lived reality of authors and readers, raises broad philosophical questions about what can be "carried across" (translated) from the text into life and from life back into the text. By examining Hearn's interactions with the date palm tree, among other selections from his travel writing about New Orleans, I will also argue that the negotiation of this disconnect can reveal to us Hearn's awareness of the limitations of his chosen mode of local color as a means of conveying (in realist fashion) information about particular local spaces. By depicting what would befall one who pressed too hard to confirm and conform the world of the local color text to lived reality, Hearn warns his readers of the harshness of reality – that in attempting to pin down a text

to a determinate and singular physical meaning, one inadvertently risks forgetting the romantic elements of local color and receiving, at the end of their efforts, nothing but unsatisfying and inconclusive results. Hearn dramatizes this via his account of tracking down the date palm depicted in Thomas Bailey Aldrich's "Père Antoine's Date-Palm" only to find a far less romantic tree at the end of his search. His disillusionment can be read as signaling the death of the romantic vision or can be seen, paradoxically but perhaps more productively, as making use of this disillusionment to reinforce a romantic vision of the world.

When examining these scenes of disappointment in local color literature, we find the genre yet again struggling with its dual lineage as a hybrid product of nineteenth-century realism and nineteenth-century romanticism. When such a project eventually breaks down, the reader might experience, as Hearn eventually does, a disillusionment, a sense that the romance that appealed to them in fictional representations of local spaces is nothing but that – a fiction – and cannot be accessed in lived reality. In his search for the date-palm, we can track Hearn along the following trajectory: (1) Attraction of the romantic leads the reader, Hearn, to attempt to trace (using realist elements) the spaces related to the romance; (2) The attempt fails; lived reality and the fictional world do not align as one expected; (3) The reader is left with a sense that the romance of the text and the empirical data of lived historical-cultural reality cannot be reconciled. Yet I wish to propose a more cheerful trajectory, one that ends not with a failure to reconcile the realistic and romanticist elements of local color literature but one that successfully integrates these elements, for when, in stage two above, the attempt fails, we find Hearn not simply mourning the death of romance but potentially re-entering the realm of romance via this disappointment.

When he arrived in New Orleans in November 1877, Hearn could not help contextualizing his first impressions of the city through literature. Though George Washington Cable had yet to publish *Old Creole Days* (which would emerge as a collection in 1879), his short stories had circulated in national periodicals years earlier. Having read "Jean-Ah Poquelin" in the May 1875 issue of *The Century*, Hearn focalized his first impressions of New Orleans from the deck of the *Thompson Deane* through the lens of Cable's fiction. He would later recount these impressions in an article, published in *The Century* in November 1883, "The Scenes of Cable's Romances." Hearn admits that reading Cable's "Jean-Ah Poquelin" left him with exotic expectations and an eagerness to idealize "everything peculiar and semi-tropical" he might find in the city (40). Like the nineteenth-century literary tourists who would follow after him, Hearn disembarked at New Orleans seeking to authenticate the spaces depicted in Cable's short stories. His account of this enterprise begins with a lament. New construction projects and the steady progress of postbellum industrialization (and, with it, Anglo-Americanization) threatened, in Hearn's view, the last remaining enclaves of Creole New Orleans. Even the modern gambling halls lacked for Hearn the aristocratic ambience of those depicted in Cable's texts, frequented by such characters as the Colonel De Charleu (41). Despite his critique of this perceived cultural erosion, Hearn constructs in "The Scenes of Cable's Romances" an image of postbellum New Orleans every bit as picturesque as the city we find in Cable's *Old Creole Days* – a New Orleans rich in "rare golden luminosities" (47). While I will return to "The Scenes of Cable's Romances" in the final section of this chapter, placing it alongside other writers' attempts to utilize local color as part of guidebooks for tourists and other ephemera from the early era of tourism in New Orleans, for the moment it is enough to note that it indicates that Hearn arrived in his new city with an existing mental archive of local texts and literary reference points.

Another account of Hearn's first days in New Orleans, this one published much closer to his actual arrival in the city, appeared in the *Cincinnati Commercial* on November 26, 1877. Written under the pseudonym Ozias Midwinter (a mysterious and suitably Gothic character from Wilkie Collins's novel *Armadale*), Hearn's article "At the Gates of the Tropics" describes his actual arrival in New Orleans and his first days in the city (November 19 – November 20). In contrast to the quaintness he would later summon in "The Scenes of Cable's Romances," he presents in this earlier remembrance a depiction of a New Orleans plunged deeply into modernity, industrialization, and internationalism. It is everywhere and nowhere: "for while it actually resembles no other city upon the face of the earth, yet it recalls vague memories of a hundred cities. It owns suggestions of towns in Italy, and in Spain, of cities in England and in Germany, of seaports in the Mediterranean, and of seaports in the tropics" (670). Such an equation of the "everywhereness" of New Orleans would later be echoed by Cable's Aline Chapdelaine from his late novel *The Flower of the Chapdelaines*. Aline remarks to her lover, regarding the many curious tales told by their neighbors in the French Quarter, that such stories appeal to us "not… because the *vieux carré* is unlike, but *so* like the rest of the world" (234). Here again, we uncover the key tension of local color – the need to simultaneously familiarize and de-familiarize regions of the nation-state, though Aline's use of the word *world* here rather than the word *country* does still indicate a New Orleanian internationalism. Hearn is quick to make the same move from familiarization to exoticism, for, after comparing New Orleans to a variety of other cities and praising the picturesque qualities of its houses and gardens, he leaps into more surreal aspects of the city. Witnessing the workings of a gigantic cotton press, Hearn is put in mind of the machine as a great monster. In typical fashion, Hearn imagines the press transformed into not just any monster but "one of those horrible, yawning heads which formed

the gates of the *teocallis* at Palenque, and through whose awful jaws the sacrificial victims passed" (675). Esoterica, again, is never far from Hearn's pen.

From the monstrous indigenous Mexican *teocallis* and the machine's astounding capacity for cotton compression, Hearn shifts abruptly to the subject of most import to the inquiry of this chapter – his verification project of the details contained in Thomas Bailey Aldrich's local color story "Père Antoine's Date Palm." Here we find Hearn interacting not only with the particularities of New Orleans's colonial mythos but also with how that mythos might intersect with verifiable historical data. We also must be careful to position Hearn's quest as one filtered through the genre of the travelogue and acknowledge its publication in Cincinnati under a pseudonym. Keeping in mind the distinctions between the "real" biographical Hearn and the "traveler" Hearn of the text, we can proceed. Hearn identifies Aldrich's story explicitly as he begins the next section of "At the Gates of the Tropics," then quickly offers his summary of the plot. Though Hearn identifies the story with an Aldrich collection *Marjorie Daw, and Other Stories* (1873), Aldrich had published "Père Antoine's Date Palm" more than a decade earlier in the June 1862 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. In fact, the frame narrative of Aldrich's story – unmentioned by Hearn – concerns a vivacious Confederate expatriate named Miss Badeau who, put off by warfare, moves North "where she has remained ever since in a sort of aromatic, rose-colored state of rebellion" (778). The narrator makes no secret of being absolutely smitten with Miss Badeau as he goes on to repeat her hope, confessed to him across a boarding house dining table, that the Union Army when they "capture my New Orleans . . . will have the good taste not to injure Père Antoine's Date-Palm"[15] (778). The narrator requests more information about the tree, and thus Badeau begins "The Legend," though the narrator confesses that he will not be able

[15] The Union Navy, under the command of the East Tennessean Admiral David G. Farragut, had swiftly and decisively captured New Orleans in April 1862, several months before the publication of "Père Antoine's Date Palm" in *Harper's*.

to translate the story exactly as she told it to him because "I haven't a black ribbed-silk dress, and a strip of point-lace around my throat, like Miss Badeau; it will be because I haven't her eyes and lips and music to tell it with, confound me!" (778). So already we have, within the world of the text, an expression of anxiety about the inability to accurately convey what is, in this case, the "lived" experience of a fictional character. We will see similar moves in Hearn's own grappling with the short story. The plot of "Père Antoine's Date Palm" follows the eponymous priest Antonio de Sedella – a folk hero of sorts in New Orleans. (He features as a character in Charles Gayarré's *Fernando de Lemos* and is on record as having baptized Gayarré's illegitimate child.) Foiled in love when his friend runs off to the tropics with the woman they had been rivals for, Antoine joins the priesthood. Years later, he receives notice that his best friend and this woman have died, leaving behind a child. He adopts the child, Anglice (named after her mother), and brings her from her Pacific island home to New Orleans. There she finds herself unable to adapt: "She talked continually of the bright country where she was born, the fruits and flowers and blue skies" (779). As time goes on, she grows more and more homesick, eventually withering and dying. From her corpse, buried in a shallow grave in Père Antoine's garden, there grows an exotic species of palm tree not known to flourish in the climate of the Gulf South. Anxious that the modernization of New Orleans will threaten the date palm that has become for him a symbol of three people he loves – his bosom companion, his youthful beloved, and their daughter – Père Antoine stipulates in the deed to the property that any future owner who cuts down the palm tree will forfeit his right to the land. Miss Badeau closes her tale as follows:

> And there it [the date palm] stands in the narrow, dingy street, a beautiful, dreamy stranger, an exquisite foreign lady whose grace is a joy to the eye, the incense of whose breath makes the air enamored. A precious boon she is to the wretched city; and when loyal men again walk those streets, may the hand wither that touches her ungently!
>
> "Because it grew from the heart of the little Anglice," said Miss Badeau, tenderly. (781)

Though one could certainly compose a fascinating close reading of this text for its use of doubling – Badeau and Anglice as exiles, Badeau and the elder Anglice as vivacious women described as possessing an aggressive physicality, the post-Louisiana Purchase New Orleans and the captured New Orleans of 1862 – here I want to focus more on the reaction Lafcadio Hearn had to this short story in "At the Gates of the Tropics."

Shortly after Hearn's arrival in the city, he expresses an overwhelming desire to track down the palm tree mentioned in Aldrich's story. Searching through garden after garden, he (according to his account in the *Cincinnati Commercial* article) repeatedly asks homeowners if the palm tree growing in their yards is Père Antoine's date-palm. Priests at St. Louis Cathedral cannot assist him. An exotic palm tree in a courtyard that reminds Hearn of the Song of Solomon turns out to be far too young to date back to the days of Père Antoine. When Hearn finds a sympathetic bookseller who directs him to the location of the palm, he discovers not a confirmation of the legend but rather a proliferation of stories about the tree: "there were many legends concerning it. Some said it had been planted over the grave of some Turk or Moor,—perhaps a fierce corsair from Algiers or Tunis—who died while sailing up the Mississippi, and was buried on its moist shores" (678). When Hearn finally tracks down the tree, "near the French Cathedral [St. Louis Cathedral], not far from Congo Square," he finds little in the way of exotic beauty (678). The tree grows in the yard of a "dingy wood-shed on the north side of Orleans street" (678). The inhabitant of the cottage is a plainspoken woman who shrugs off Hearn's questions about Père Antoine's date palm. "Monsieur," she tells him, aware of the variety of interpretations that circle around the planting of the palm, "there are many droll stories which they relate of that tree" (679). She offers more versions of the tale than the bookseller – that the tree is the burial place of a young girl (as in Aldrich's version), that a Sultan lies buried beneath

the palm, that American Indians from Florida transplanted it. Most disappointing for Hearn, however, is the realization that the tree is not a date-palm at all but produces instead an oily, apparently inedible fruit.

When Hearn eventually tracks down the owner of the property, he is told that the tree pre-existed the French colonization of New Orleans and that expeditions as early as 1679 recorded mention of the palm tree. "As for Père Antoine," confesses Hearn, "he [the owner] had never heard of him. Neither had he heard of Thomas Bailey Aldrich. So that I departed, mourning for my dead faith in a romance which was beautiful" (679). Though one might imagine Hearn attempting to construct a kind of natural, pre-colonial mystique for the palm tree given this competing narrative, he never makes such a move. Instead, we end with his lament for his failure to authenticate the literary-symbolic order surrounding the tree. The lament indicates Hearn's own desires to reconcile the literary order with his lived reality (or his lived reality as a narrator within the article – for we must again carefully balance our reading of "At the Gates of the Tropics" as confessional piece about Hearn's actual first experiences in New Orleans with its status as an article written under a pseudonym for the *Cincinnati Commercial*). On both counts, however, we can nonetheless discern the same impulses and the same anxieties about the self-conscious failure of the local color text – in this case Thomas Bailey Aldrich's "Père Antoine's Date-Palm" – to adequately represent the geographies of the past or to bring one back into contact with traces of that past in the spaces that local color literature utilizes for its ever-ubiquitous settings. In the moment of disappointment, the local color reader (Hearn, reader of Aldrich) exists in a space at the crossroads of romance and realism – attracted by the romantic elements of a text yet driven (somewhat paradoxically) to pursue a verification of the historical and geographic specifics of that text.

Part of Hearn's disappointment may stem from an obsession with accessing an "authentic" culture in an exotic space. Other famous examples of nineteenth-century travel writing, in particular Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), make use of disappointment and disillusionment as crucial thematic devices. Like Hearn, Twain dabbled in a variety of genres but enjoyed a firm reputation as an author of texts that highlighted regional distinctiveness. Here we can consider the overlap between local color and travel writing insofar as the disillusionment of an outsider appears as a frequent element in both. In *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain is ever finding that the grand monuments and exotic spaces he read about in literature (ancient, biblical, modern) fail to live up to his expectations. This becomes particularly frustrating for Twain in the Holy Land, as he discovers a considerable lack of grandeur and expansiveness in actual Palestine compared to the Palestine he imagined while reading the Bible. Not only is the Jordan River, site of the baptism of Christ by St. John the Baptist, narrower than Broadway in New York, but the whole of Palestine itself is smaller than Twain imagined it to be. Travel for Twain becomes not an opportunity to revel in seeing in real life those spaces depicted in books but an experience that wounds one's belief in the beauty of such sites:

> Travel and experience mar the grandest pictures and rob us of the most cherished traditions of our boyhood. Well, let them go. I have already seen the Empire of King Solomon diminish to the size of the State of Pennsylvania. (597)

Such disappointment, Richard S. Lowry claims in his essay "Framing the Authentic: The Modern Tourist and *The Innocents Abroad* "was for nineteenth-century travel writers "as integral a component of the rhetoric of authentic culture as was rapture" (21). To lose faith indicates that one, at an earlier period, entertained the possibility of the ideal coinciding with the real. In this dissertation I have consciously avoided and will consciously continue to avoid getting lost in the rather unproductive tangle of defining or tracing authenticity. When the term arises, however, I

will pursue it mainly from the angle of discussing desires for authenticity rather than authenticity itself. While acknowledging that other critics might fruitfully pursue inquiries into authenticity as a thematic touchstone of Hearn's New Orleans writings, I want to approach Hearn's disappointment with the palm-tree as a problem tied to the literary limits of local color's attempts to offer (alongside its plot) historical, geographic, or ethnographic information. One might justly respond that fiction need not attempt such accuracy – but the authorship and the readership of local color literature insisted so much upon the mode's verisimilitude (eg. Cable's careful orthographic rendering of dialect; tourists to New Orleans allegedly carrying *Old Creole Days* with them to track down, street-by-street, the homes of fictional characters) that we can justifiably explore the dynamics of what happens when the local color text is perceived by its audience as failing to render an accurate description of place.

Of course the desire to verify that the world of the literary text does, in fact, overlap with the world of lived experience is not unique to the era of late-nineteenth century regionalism. We find a Modernist take on the phenomenon explained by Marcel Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu* as follows:

> Had my parents allowed me, when I read a book, to pay a visit to the region it described, I should have felt that I was making an enormous advance towards the ultimate conquest of truth . . . We try to discover in things, which become precious to us on that account, the reflection of what our soul has projected on to them; we are disillusioned when we find that they are in reality devoid of the charm which they owed, in our minds, to the association of certain ideas. (93)

Disillusionment here becomes an opportunity for romantic experience to reassert itself in the face of its apparent dissolution. In this passage we find that one of the classics of literary Modernism shares key thematic concerns with local color literature, giving the lie to the early critical assessments of regionalist literature as a mode more concerned with a whimsical pseudo-ethnography than with aesthetics or philosophy. Here we see Proust, engaging just as much as

Hearn and Twain, with the disparities between the romantic world of the literary text and the lived experience of modernity. It is this same disappointment and this perceived rift between text/world and past/present that we find in such pieces by Hearn as "The Pelican's Ghost," published in November 1880 during his time as a writer for the New Orleans *City Item*. Accompanied by Hearn's own woodcut of a transparent pelican perched atop the head of Andrew Jackson's equestrian statue in the Place d'Armes, the sketch mourns the disappearance of the bird that once frequented the area around the square (see Fig. 2.1). Hearn conjectures that it might have been the corruption of the city's Reconstruction politics that caused the bird to flee. At this point, the Battle of Liberty Place was only six years past in the memories of the city's residents. Hearn's speculation, though, yields to the explanation of the ghost of the pelican itself as it offers a rationale for its departure:

> I was a Symbol. I am still a Symbol in my ghostliness. I betoken the old-fashioned life of the Pelican State that is passing away. I represent the quaintness that is dying out, and the antiquated thing that shall soon become as ghostly as myself. The old city is becoming Americanized; and I am glad that I am dead. (*INO* 190)

Here we find a similar dynamic at work as that which informed "At the Gates of the Tropics." The pelican, even though it has disappeared and thus is an example of the city's allegedly lost romance, reasserts itself in its loss as part of a continuing romance – the romance of nostalgia for the lost city, the lost *ethos* of colonial and antebellum New Orleans. Even in its death, the pelican retains its power. This paradox harkens back to the medieval depiction of the "pelican in her piety," a figure of both destruction and renewal as the blood that runs from her breast feeds her young. The symbol itself remains on the flag of the state of Louisiana, a nod not only to actual pelicans who inhabit the southern part of the state but also symbolic, literary, and metaphorical pelicans – the medieval "pelican in her piety," the *Pie Pelicane* of St. Thomas Aquinas, and the Catholic association of the self-sacrificing pelican with the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ.

Fig. 2.1: Lafcadio Hearn woodcut for the article "The Pelican's Ghost" – with Andrew Jackson's statue (history) opaque against the sky and the Pelican (romance) transparent. (Source: Starr, *Inventing New Orleans: Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*; 189).

Hearn's "The Pelican's Ghost" represents as well a key element of romance – and in particular the romanticist elements of local color literature. It is a sense of falling-off from a previous era of gentility and beauty to the homogeneity of modernity in which cultural distinctiveness becomes lost, a victim to the "sameness" brought about by industrialization and global democratization. We see this most plainly in Charles Gayarré's *Fernando de Lemos*, but we also hear Creole characters in Cable's *The Grandissimes* mourn their lost world (even as Cable's own politics call for a New South). So by indulging in disappointment at the conclusion of "At the Gates of the Tropics," Hearn re-enters the circle. He enters back into the hybrid world where romantic impulse (to indulge in *topophilia*, to take delight in wrought-iron and magnolia) blends and interpenetrates with impulses towards empirical verification. Such an interpenetration, an intersection between the romantic and the empirical, informs not only local color literature but the way in which early tourist materials adpated this literary rhetoric to market particular local sites to visitors. In the final section of this chapter, I explore how New Orleans guidebook culture – a culture in which Hearn himself was deeply involved – attempted a kind of balance (similar to the one attempted by local color literature) between offering tourists the pleasure of verifying empirical data about the city they had learned from regionalist literature and history books and simultaneously allowing them to indulge in subjective experiences of the exotic, the ineffable, and the untranslatable.

The Untranslatable City and New Orleans Guidebook Culture

The guidebook, by the very definition of its genre, serves as a tool of translation. If local color literature provided its readership with ethnographic depictions of local customs and folkways while simultaneously leaving parts of these folkways illegible or mysterious to the

reader, one might reasonably expect the guidebook to provide the key to outsiders attempting to enter an unfamiliar space. Yet this section will argue that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century guidebooks about New Orleans incorporated the same balancing of explanation with mystification as did local color literature about the city. In doing so, I am indebted to the connection made by Richard Brodhead concerning how local color and travel writing coexisted in national periodicals, that "writing marked as literary in the Gilded Age appeared in these journals together with the prose of vacation travel, and not just together but in virtually fixed conjunction with such prose" (131). We will see in the New Orleans guidebooks that this conjunction works in the opposite direction as well – that the travel guides incorporate the literary (eg. poetry) alongside train schedules and practical information such as which hours of the day members of New Orleans's high society receive guests. Calling attention to the fact that these guidebooks share in local color's blending of romantic elements with concrete information about the city's infrastructure and its functioning may open up critical inquiry into literary aspects of the guidebook genre more broadly (not just in postbellum New Orleans). The main guidebooks considered in this section will be primarily those that were published (some with the contributions by Hearn himself) during the city's 1884 World's Industrial and Cotton Exposition, including *Soard's Guide to New Orleans* (1884) and William H. Coleman's *Historical Sketchbook and Guide to New Orleans (Exposition Edition, Illustrated)* (1885) – to which Hearn himself contributed. Later guidebooks, such as *A Little Guide to New Orleans: What to See and How to See It* (1892), *New Orleans: Where to Shop, to Eat, to Go, to Gossip* (1917), and *A Tour of Vieux Carré* (1928), will receive attention as well.

Just as Hearn's *Chita* and his travel writing exist in a state of tension between romanticism and realism, the 1884 World's Industrial and Cotton Exposition in New Orleans

(also referred to as the Cotton Centennial) represented a similar space of tension between those planners and visitors who approached it as a celebration of New Orleans's industrial modernity and its connections to international economies and those who approached it as an opportunity to celebrate the city's vaunted quaintness and picturesqueness. Yet the claims for the city's industrial efficiency and modern technological prowess were belied by the inability of the planners to construct the exhibition itself on time. As visitors arrived in the city, they found an exhibition hall where only a few exhibits had been completely assembled and where construction crews remained hard at work building platforms. If that were not enough, New Orleans streetcar drivers chose this most inopportune time to go on strike. The director of the exhibition admitted in 1885 that the whole project had accrued a quarter of a million dollars in debt (Smith 146). Even Lafcadio Hearn himself reportedly lamented (though not in public) that the exhibition was nothing more than a "big fraud" (Smith 151). This dour pronouncement came in spite of the fact that Hearn had contributed to William H. Coleman's exhibition guide and the fact that Hearn's cookbook *La Cuisine Creole* as well as *Gumbo Zhèbes* had been sold at the fair. Dogged by lukewarm press, poorly-planned infrastructure, and debt, the 1884 World' s Industrial and Cotton Exposition gained the reputation of many a world's fair – a questionable financial decision on the part of its host city.

Yet, as the New Orleans author Grace King insisted, the true success of the exhibition lay in its opening up of New Orleans to visitors and tourists. "It was not that which was built by hands that gave this exposition its historical importance," King noted in her *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters* (1932) as she looked back on the previous century's fair. "It was not the exhibits. It was the people who came to it. It was the visitors from a distance, and foremost among them the newspaper correspondents sent out to report upon the land and its people"

(51).[16] Kevin Fox Gotham, in *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy* (2007) similarly locates the importance of the Cotton Centennial in the way it offered the cultural forces of the city a focal point for consolidating their efforts at constructing and reinforcing a particular view of New Orleans for outsiders. Gotham argues that part of these efforts involved "the development of an urban iconography about New Orleans that could act as an attraction for potential tourists and a cultural framework for validating their experience once they arrived in the city" (56). This emphasis on validation harkens back to Hearn's own experiences with Père Antoine's date-palm, and it points to how this process of translation of experience from the page to the lived reality functioned as well for tourists and visitors to the city in their use of guidebooks that drew upon the very local color tropes that Cable, Hearn, and Grace King utilized in their fiction. Yet I want to argue here that even as guidebooks in New Orleans borrowed the tropes of local color literature to construct an "urban iconography" for the city, they also exhibited the same conflicting impulses of that literature, offering a legible and consumable culture for outsiders while simultaneously (and strategically) rendering aspects of the city illegible, mysterious, and untranslatable.

One of these guides – *Soard's Guide to New Orleans* (1884) – calls our attention to this complicated interplay between a practical desire to make the city legible and navigable and a romantic desire to render it charmingly opaque. In a section designed to help visitors navigate the city blocks and work out the logic of address numberings (not an uncommon element in

[16] Outlived only by Alice Dunbar-Nelson among the New Orleanian local colorists, Grace King was one of the last of the nineteenth-century Louisiana literati (Gayarré, Cable, Hearn, Chopin) to pass away, leaving her in a position to offer the "final" remarks on her literary period. The birth of her own career stems from the downfall of Cable's reputation in New Orleans. She famously took up her pen after Richard Watson Gilder, editor of the *Century*, responded to her complaints about Cable by asking her to write a more accurate depiction of Creole life in the city. In 1895 she joined the humble funeral procession that transported the body of Charles Gayarré from North Prieur Street to St. Louis Cathedral (Tregle 185). Even as late as 1932, she still found space in *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters* to offer a final condemnation of Cable as a culture-traitor who sold out to pander to Northern tastes (60).

guidebooks of the period), Soard's guide openly warns visitors that "streets and numbers are perplexing in the extreme" (34). Yet this problem of translating aspects of city geography to outsiders becomes an opportunity for the compilers of the guidebook to make this illegibility do cultural work. Navigational difficulty can add to the overall delight of the touristic experience of the city if such difficulties can be grounded in a charming Creole past:

> Even when the Council changed the name of one of those continuations [of a street], the old Creoles, their children and children's children, continue to call it [the street] by the ancient name. Thus we hear of Greatmen, Love and Bagatelle Streets to this day, in face of the fact that the lamp signs for years have been Dauphine, North Rampart and Bourbon. (34)

As for house and building numbers, the guidebook similarly offers little in the way of practical help but much in the way of perpetuating an image of the city's whimsical archaisms. Numbers are "affixed upon the convictions or fancies of property holders, rather than by the result of surveyor's lines. You may live at 403 and your vis-à-vis will, likely as not, be 320" (34). Here the guidebook – ostensibly a genre that would illuminate these mysteries – becomes in fact a participant in representing the city as a complex structure that resists attempts at easy categorization or organization. In a later section, Soard's guide does, in fact, offer a thorough city directory. Thus it accomplishes the dual move of presenting the city (and here the very same aspect of the city, its street geographies) as both illegible and legible, much in the same manner as local color fiction had done in the previous decade.

The guide most famously associated with the World's Industrial and Cotton Exposition – the William H. Coleman *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans* (1885) – directly called upon the literary talent of New Orleans for its materials. Much historical data is mined from Charles Gayarré's histories of Louisiana. George Washington Cable himself, not yet hounded from the city in the aftermath of the Creole Controversy, contributed introductory

remarks to the guidebook in which he claimed to have personally supervised the sketching of buildings related to his short stories from *Old Creole Days*. Illustrations included in the guidebook include the alleged locations of Madame Delphine's house (not Delphine Lalaurie but the Madame Delphine of *Old Creole Days*), Delphine Lalaurie's "Haunted House on Royal Street," 'Sieur George's house, the Café des Exilés, and Madame John's Legacy. These illustrations reinforced the popular and oft-attested practice – a practice Cable himself knew and sometimes playfully responded to in his work – of readers walking through the French Quarter, copies of *Old Creole Days* in hand, trying to follow the paths of Cable's characters through the actual French Quarter. This is the very kind of validation that Hearn attempted with the date-palm and that Gotham would later theorize as a touristic response to the iconography of the city promulgated by national periodical culture.

Later periodicals utilized similar moves that represented the city as both legible and illegible for visitors. One, *A Little Guide to New Orleans: What to See and How to See It* (1892), calls our attention via its very title to a claim that tourists must approach the city in a very particular fashion that (with capitalist felicity) the guidebook itself promises to explain. What is so striking about *The Little Guide,* however, is that its opening section "A Word By Way of Welcome" begins with an active subversion of the very New Orleanian iconography that had been built up by local color literature and guidebook culture alike. We open not with images of magnolias, wrought-iron balconies, or Creole songs but rather with this invitation: "I offer you an omelette souflée, a palm leaf fan, and a rose!" (1). Certainly there is nothing particularly Creole about an omelette souflée, apart from perhaps the French resonance of the souflée as a culinary delight. The palm leaf fan might conceivably be seen as a tropical image, but the rose certainly does not fall into any typical New Orleans iconography. The soufflée, the fan, and the

rose might be symbols of hospitality and touristic leisure anywhere in the Western world – Paris, Rome, London. They shy away from insisting upon an exotic particularity but present themselves as only an introduction to a city that must be known in more complex ways than by a pat reliance upon standard local color tropes. "A Word By Way of Welcome" continues to present readers of *The Little Guide* with a city ever incomprehensible and untranslatable: "She [New Orleans] is not to be known in a day, and she will unfold herself slowly, petal by petal, growing in charm each day, as Venice does – surely not to be comprehended in an eye-flash" (1). Of course the introduction does eventually nod to Cable and (oddly) the travel writing of Charles Dudley Warner, but on the whole it manages to offer a space that is at once exotic (a mix of Arcady and Bohemia) without falling into the standard tropes associated with New Orleanian exoticism. We end, after being taken through the mansions of the Garden District, with the repeated invitation from the introduction's first line: "And so, with all her products and her commerce, her busy marts and her fine buildings, her opera and theatres, and her balls and routs, who desires that she [New Orleans] shall offer you anything better than an omelette souflée, a palm leaf fan and a rose?" (5).

Much like the local color texts that preceded them, twentieth-century guidebooks would also walk the tight-rope between familiarizing and de-familiarizing the city. However, possibly finding that the tropes circulated by the likes of George Washington Cable or Grace King had grown a bit stale with the shift in centuries, some of these later guidebooks avoid a local color aesthetic in favor of incorporating much more peculiar and idiosyncratic literary touches. *New Orleans: Where to Shop, to Eat, to Go, to Gossip* (1917) includes snippets of poetry for the entertainment of its readers, but these are not poems interspersed with dialect or references to Creole culture. Many of them express themes that seem, in light of the 1917 publication date,

more related to the growing disenchantment of the West following the First World War than anything to do with Cable, Hearn, or Chopin. One poem in particular seems surprisingly somber for inclusion in a tourist magazine. After an initial farewell to "the romance of evening" that the poetic speaker once enjoyed, we reach this disillusioned verse:

> Farewell to those joys of youthful illusion
> I've been lured in the Babel of Human Confusion
> To be darkened by isms, hemmed in by ists –
> In ceasing to *live*, to be lost in man's mists. (5)

We end the poem not in the realm of romance but in a space where the author, now older and more jaded, mourns her inability to have direct access to reality – instead finding herself lost in the constructed world of theories and "isms." Other twentieth-century guidebooks, such as G. William Nott's *A Tour of the Vieux Carré* (1928), however, did attempt to revive elements of the local color iconography that surrounded the city. With an introduction by Grace King, Nott's *Tour* not only reinforces the local color culture of the city but builds upon it. King's introduction puts forward an as yet unattested claim that the songs of the old Creoles of color (including the famous "Pov Piti Momzel Zizi" that Cable once sang during his literary tour with Mark Twain) use stock characters in a manner similar to Italian *commedia dell'arte*, including Milatresse ("the sport of the white man"), Cocodrie ("pure black," the servant of Milatresse), and Trouloulou (a free man of color, accepted into the parties of the Milatresse "in the guise of a musician") (22). While this guide includes a number of untranslated Creole songs – or Creole songs with snippets translated into English – we also find here the impulse we found in Hearn for verification. Included in Nott's guide are not only references to the houses of characters in *Old Creole Days* but actual street addresses: 'Sieur George's house at 638 Royal; Café des Exilés at 801 Royal; Tite Poulette's house at the corner of Royal and Dumaine 710; Koppig's residence at 709 Dumaine (to keep an eye on the house of Poulette); Dr. Mossy's Office from "Madame

Delicieuse" at 1026 Royal; and Madame John's Legacy at 632 Dumaine. Here, even at this late date, we find the same interplay between desires to keep the city strategically mysterious to outsiders but also to offer specific spaces where readers can attempt to connect their experience with the world of the text to the world of lived reality. (Such moves will be explored in a more extensive fashion in Chapter Three, which will analyze scholarly attempts to map the semi-fictional geographies of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's short stories onto maps of nineteenth-century New Orleans.)

Thus we find the guidebooks grappling with the same impulses and desires that fueled local color writing – ethnography and geography, on one hand, and romance, on the other, blending together in a Creole sublime that offered readers the delights of both verification and mystification. These texts framed the city as both fascinating and daunting, a space one could navigate to a certain extent but also a space of imaginative possibilities. Hearn himself plays with the mysterious incomprehensibility of a very different city in the final lines of his chapter "Lys" from *Martinique Sketches*, lines that narrate the arrival of a Creole girl from the Caribbean in New York City. As she stands on the deck of the boat watching the city arise out of the mist, the narrator meditates:

> But in each one of us there lives a mysterious Something which is Self, yet also infinitely more than Self, — incomprehensibly multiple, — the complex total of sensations, impulses, timidities belonging to the unknown past . . . . And lo! — opening mile-wide in dream-gray majesty before us, — reaching away, through measureless mazes of masting, into remoteness all vapor-veiled, — the mighty perspective of New York harbor! (532-3)

It is this epistemological humility before the ineffable Something that keeps Hearn's writing and the guidebooks which pulled from his local color tropes playful even in the face of their desire for specificity and empirical verification. We are always aware of the counter-pull of romance against the temptation towards believing one's translation – of dialogue, of cities, of experience –

could ever be satisfactory.

CHAPTER THREE – [MAPPINGS]
The Same People, The Same Street: Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *The Goodness of St. Rocque* and the Interpretive Limits of Mapping Local Color

> I don't lak' New Orleans; it too near here, dere no mo' money dere. I go up fo' Mardi Gras, an' de same people, de same strit'. I'm goin' to Chicago!
>
> Sylves' from "When the Bayou Overflows," *The Goodness of St . Rocque* (1899)

> The Real sent home the play, of course, not distinctively colored enough. They are anxious about the serial. It has the same disqualification. I shall try to get time to write another.
>
> Alice Dunbar-Nelson, diary entry regarding the Realart Pictures Corporation's rejection of her screenplay based on *The Goodness of St. Rocque* (20 October 1921)

Over a decade ago Franco Moretti's short, suggestive, and provocative *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005) called for an openness in literary study to empirical methods of inquiry more familiar to the sciences than the arts. Such methods might allow us, so Moretti muses, to achieve new insights into literature and to offer new interpretations of texts – a tempting prospect given the contemporary pressures placed upon scholars in the humanities to make all things new and to provide fresh approaches to the perennial objects of our study. By organizing data about texts using the mathematical, geographical, and scientific tools of graphs, maps, and trees, Moretti argues we can achieve insights obscured from us by other modes of textual analysis. Within this framework, stepping back from a text to map its geography becomes a means of uncovering "'emerging' qualities, which were not visible at the lower level" (53). Mapping, then, "offers a model of the narrative universe which rearranges its components in a non-trivial way, and may bring some hidden patterns to the surface" (54). Despite the controversy that *Graphs, Maps, Trees* generated, Moretti himself demonstrates an awareness of the limitations of graphing, mapping, and charting. He proposes no totalizing schema, and he acknowledges that such tools lend themselves better to some texts than to others. With an *enfant terrible* grin, Moretti admits his awareness of the limitations of his method: "geography is a useful tool, yes, but does not explain *everything*. For that we have astrology and 'Theory'" (53). This chapter follows Moretti's

lead, acknowledging that mapping locations within local color texts can serve as a "useful tool" for interpretation and that too firm an insistence upon mapping as a methodology can often work against an element that is crucial for our experience of these texts – the element of aesthetic indeterminacy. This chapter on Alice Dunbar-Nelson arises out of a curiosity regarding what we can learn from a geographic mapping of New Orleans as it appears within her fictional texts as well as what gets "left out" when we map literature. Special attention will be paid to critical questions as to whether Dunbar-Nelson coded race via geography into the otherwise racially-ambiguous short stories of *The Goodness of St. Rocque* (1899). Finally, this chapter will consider what we can learn from attending to the very elements in her short story collection that resist the critical methods that Moretti proposes.

Like Moretti, two contemporary New Orleans cartographers display a keen sensitivity to what can be mapped and what resists mapping. Of the books on New Orleans published in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker's *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas* (2013) stands out for its careful avoidance of the kinds of extremes often present in post-storm writing about the city: exaggerations of New Orleanian exoticism, embellishment of Southern Gothic tropes, or arguments for the city's importance based strictly on the standard touristic draws of jazz music, spicy food, and unabashed hedonism. Instead, Solnit and Snedeker gather several dozen artists' and authors' creative, colorful, and at times provocative mappings of New Orleans, mappings that resist the conventional frameworks for interpreting the city and its region. One map combines two distinct geographies of containment in south Louisiana – the levee system and the state prison system (Fig. 3.1). Another, entitled "The Mississippi Is (Not) the Nile," charts major Arabic cultural sites in New Orleans. Yet another compares the locations of former sugar plantations and slave auction pens, showing us how unsettlingly close these

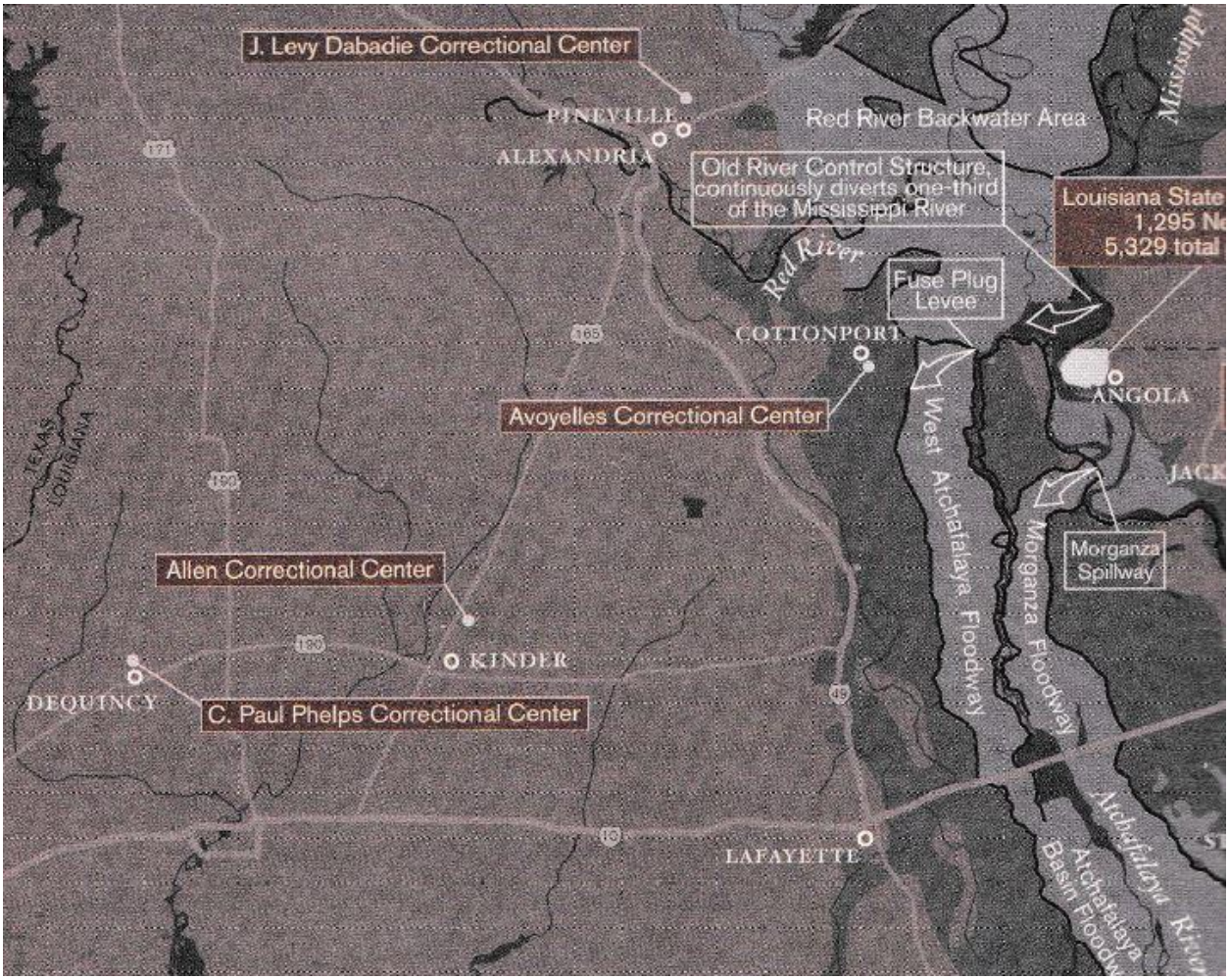


Fig. 3.1: "Of Levees and Prisons: Failures of Containment, Surges of Freedom" (Cartographer: Shizue Seigel, p.56). The arrows in the floodways on the left represent "water control structure and direction of flow."

locations brush up against modern sites of "sugar delight" such as Café du Monde, a tourist favorite famous for its powdered sugar-covered beignets (Fig. 3.2). Though political, environmental, and cultural commitments clearly inform certain aspects of their project, Solnit and Snedeker note in their introduction a reluctance to market their new atlas as strictly an exercise in filling in gaps that exist in the study of New Orleans geography. Quite the contrary, the authors link their project to a theory of unfathomability. Tracing the roots of the English *fathom* back to the Anglo-Saxon *fæðm*, they call readers' attention to the term's initial use as a form of measurement – the length of the human body, with its arms outspread, from fingertip to fingertip[17] (Solnit and Snedeker 1). Thus their acknowledgment of one's inability to fathom becomes a concurrent acknowledgment of the limits of human systems of measurement and interpretation, intellectual limits explicitly linked (via the initial criterion for measuring the fathom) to the biological limits of the embodied human being. Solnit and Snedeker, approaching their work with a keen appreciation of how such limits function in relation to our understanding of place, argue that

> every place is unfathomable, infinite, impossible to describe, because it exists in innumerable versions, because no two people live in quite the same city but live side by side in parallel universes that may or may not intersect, because the minute you map it the map becomes obsolete . . . . [W]e hope we have indicated how rich and various, how inexhaustible is this place, and any place, if you look at it, directly, and through books, conversations, maps, photographs, dreams, and desires. (1)

The resistance of cities (as complex structures) to the taming and organizing impulses of measurement, marking, mapping, and other methods of interpretation informs this chapter's approach to the work of local colorist Alice Dunbar-Nelson. Her New Orleans fiction, with its

[17] Of the literary uses of the word *fathom* to signify a form of measurement, among the most famous is Ariel's song from Shakespeare's *The Tempest:* "Full fathom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are coral made; / Those are pearls that were his eyes; / Nothing of him that doth fade, / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange" (I.ii).

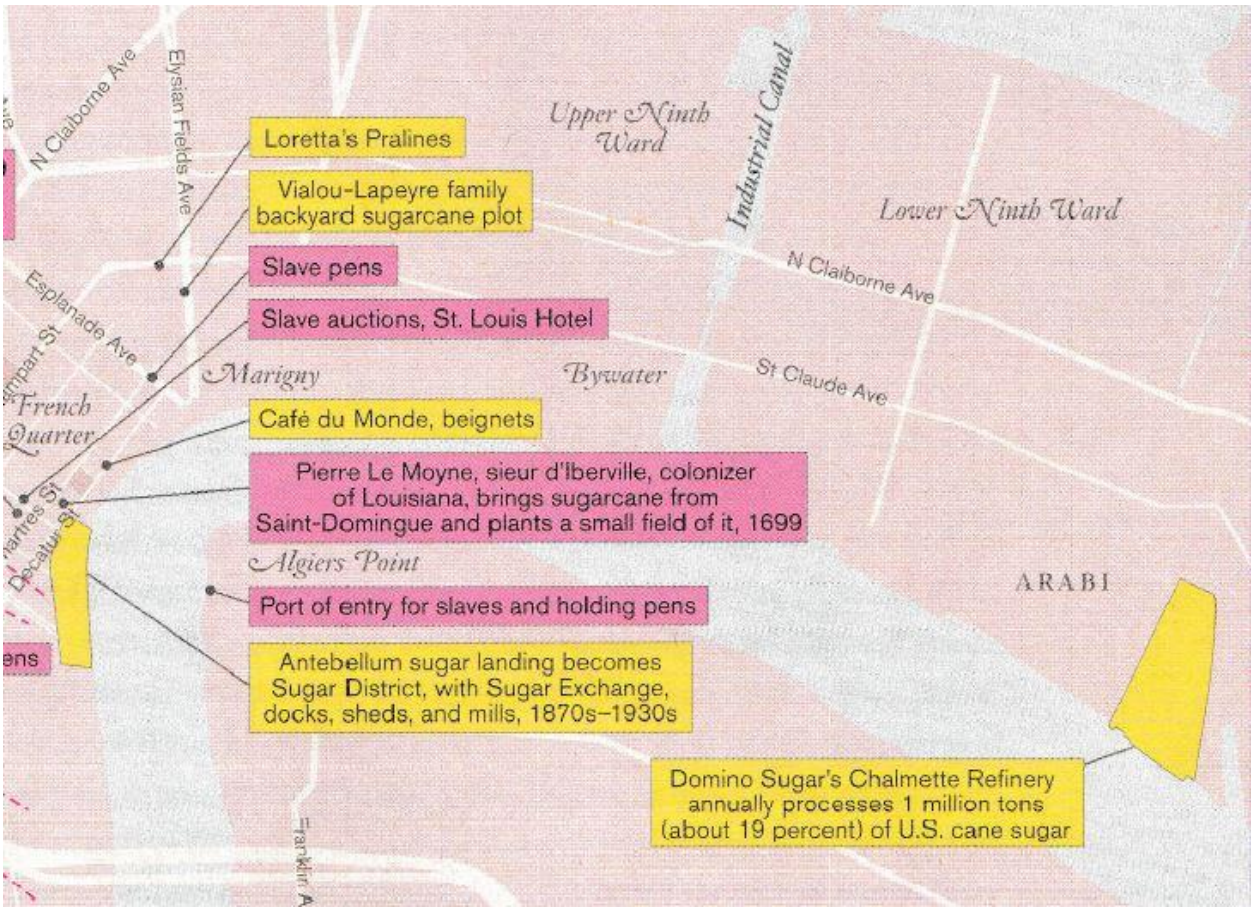


Fig. 3.2: "Sugar Heaven and Sugar Hell: Pleasures and Brutalities of a Commodity" (Cartographer: Shizue Seigel, p.69).

indeterminacy and its occlusion of clear racial distinctions between characters, simultaneously creates and destabilizes the racial geographies of the city. Despite their geographic specificity – naming streets and neighborhoods so thoroughly that it is hard to resist the temptation to chart characters' trajectories through the city – Dunbar-Nelson's short stories display an authorial awareness of the dangers, especially in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* era, of using geography as a code with which to racially-mark characters.

This chapter utilizes the insights of Solnit, Snedeker, and Moretti on the limitations of mapping to argue that critical approaches to Dunbar-Nelson's short story collection *The Goodness of St. Rocque* too often attempt to establish a determinacy about the racial identities of her characters and, in doing so, fail to appreciate racial and spatial indeterminacy as crucial thematic and structural qualities of her stories. Since its beginnings in the remarkable reclamation project undertaken by Gloria T. Hull (with the assistance of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's niece Pauline A. Young), critical conversation about Dunbar-Nelson has run repeated circles around questions of whether she achieved any kind of racial critique in her fictional work and to what extent we can read the characters in these works, particularly *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, as racially-marked. Against critics who argue that Dunbar-Nelson's stories intentionally eschew race and racial critique, others launch counterclaims that her conspicuous use of street and neighborhood names tags her characters as members of particular racial groups in subtle ways only decipherable by the most local of readerships or the most diligent of scholarly interpreters. In what follows, I will sketch out more fully the present state of this critical conversation and propose that the very questions Dunbar-Nelson criticism struggles with speak to the hermeneutic problem of local color literature as a whole. As a hybrid genre that pulls from both realism's ethnographic impulse and romanticism's attraction to the strange and unfamiliar, local color texts

– with their contradictory desires to make the local legible and mysterious at once – present a particular hermeneutic challenge to readers. Critical tendencies to shut down these moments of illegibility or mysteriousness, especially those attempting a historicist project to de-code the racial identities of Dunbar-Nelson's characters, inadvertently devalue the very ambiguity and indeterminacy that grant her stories aesthetic and intellectual appeal. For the moment, however, it is enough to note that this chapter will approach the concept of race in a very similar fashion as did Chapter One, recognizing the political and lived ramifications of race in the United States but primarily treating race (for the purposes of this inquiry) as a form of local knowledge potentially embedded within these regionalist texts.

The argument will be taken up in four sections. The first section follows Franco Moretti's call for incorporation of mapping as a means of accessing literary knowledge while simultaneously attending to his warning about the limits of such mappings. This section reads a set of stories from *The Goodness of St. Rocque* through a reconstructed racial geography of 1890s New Orleans neighborhoods to demonstrate the limits of a strictly historicist approach to "racing" Dunbar-Nelson's characters – limits not only of the availability of historical records but the limits to which this information can productively illuminate the meanings of the narratives. The second utilizes biographical and archival material on Dunbar-Nelson to articulate her own complex relationship with questions of racial ambiguity in her fictional and non-fictional literary output. The third section presents a series of close readings of another set of short stories from *The Goodness of St. Rocque* and argues that we should embrace the radical indeterminacy of these pieces as part of Dunbar-Nelson's local color aesthetic. Such a reading resonates with arguments put forward in Chapter One about Cable's playful withholding of information and arguments present in Chapter Two regarding Hearn's use of untranslated passages in his prose.

This section advances the main argument of this chapter – that Dunbar-Nelson utilizes inscrutability and indeterminacy for formal and thematic effect and that attempts to downplay this indeterminacy miss a fundamental aspect not only of her fiction but of local color as a literary mode. In contrast to existing readings that claim Dunbar-Nelson uses racial ambiguity in a proto-modernist fashion (cf. Toni Morrison's "Recitatif") or that she uses subtle clues to racially code her stories in a manner that make them impenetrable to all but the most initiated of readers, I offer a *tertium quid*. According to the reading proposed by this chapter, Dunbar-Nelson's fiction, like so much local color fiction, highlights the limits of our local knowledge as reader-outsiders in order to underscore the limits of interpretation itself. The final section of this chapter concludes this inquiry by examining how these insights about Dunbar-Nelson's short stories might illuminate our reading of local color literature more broadly. It will demonstrate how the questions of continuing interest to Dunbar-Nelson scholars actually circle around fundamental problems in constructing a fruitful hermeneutic approach to local color, one that acknowledges its specificities while remaining open to its riddles.

The Same Streets: Mapping Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Short Stories

Among the more critically-ignored pieces in Dunbar-Nelson's *Violets and Other Tales* (1895) is her sketch "Anarchy Alley." Taking her reader block by block through Exchange Alley in New Orleans, the narrator serves as a guide through this "bit of Bohemia" (62). What makes the sketch fascinating is not so much its content but its aesthetic goal, its attempt to build drama out of geography and to create a narrative arc by simply describing the street and its inhabitants. The narrator also offers veiled social commentary on the economic inequalities present on this street, yet she leaves questions about the complex motivations that influence the behavior of the

immigrants, laborers, anarchists, and drifters here unanswered: "It would be something worth knowing if one could" (60). Such a nod to both the reader's and the narrator's lack of knowledge (despite her ability to describe setting in painstakingly detailed fashion) is a hallmark of Dunbar-Nelson's narrative style. Bearing in mind Franco Moretti's coy reminder that geography cannot tell us everything, along with Solnit and Snedeker's more romanticized version of the same point in *Unfathomable City*, this section proceeds to map the racial geographies of short stories from *The Goodness of St. Rocque* with an awareness of the limitations of this method. This section argues – perhaps with a Moretti-style deviousness – that there is, yes, certain racial data encoded within *The Goodness of St. Rocque* but that the scholarly methodologies required to gain access to that information raise questions about whether a fruitful interpretation of the text truly requires such work. By aiming to keep my methodological moves clear in this section, I wish to prepare for the ultimate claim of this chapter – that critical desires for such deep fathomings of a text miss a fundamental aesthetic ambiguity in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, an ambiguity that scholars such as Bill Hardwig, Thomas Strychacz, and Judith Madera see as crucial to Alice Dunbar-Nelson's artistic project. To assert that a radical project of historicization or footnoting creates a new encounter with a text is one thing, but we must ask this – what is the level of significance attached to racially marking these characters, and what position do we place ourselves in as readers (and what are our investments) when we carry out the project of racial marking? We surely do not wish to be like the streetcar conductors of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* era, scouring the texts for signs of "brownness" or "fairness" to fix the bodies of its characters in our own questionable racial interpretations.

This examination of the limits of interpretive mapping in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* will utilize stories from the collection that have elicited the most debate among scholars

regarding the racial identities of their characters: "The Goodness of Saint Rocque," "Little Miss Sophie," and "Titee." The versions of the last two stories listed will come from *The Goodness of St. Rocque,* though references will be made to variants in their initial versions in *Violets and Other Tales* when such variants are significant in terms of alleged racial signifiers. The readings of these texts raise the question of whether or not a local reader in 1899 – one deeply familiar with the racial makeup of New Orleans neighborhoods – would have experienced the same characters and same geographies as a reader outside of this *locus* of knowledge; that is, whether they, in the words of Sylves' from "When the Bayou Overflows," would have seen in these other stories from *The Goodness of St. Rocque* "de same people, de same strit'" (97).

This analysis benefits greatly from John W. Blassingame's *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (1973) and the more recent work of geographer Richard Campanella, particularly his magisterial *Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics Before the Storm* (2006). Here "before the storm" – in keeping with the general apocalyptic tone of the post-Katrina era – includes literally every part of the city's history that precedes the 2005 hurricane, even stretching back to geological time. Though I incorporate other scholarly research into the reconstruction of racial geographies of 1890s New Orleans and into establishing the "world of the text" of *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, Blassingame and Campanella merit special recognition given that they approach their subject with an enviable level of specificity – as much specificity as the existing historical records allow. Given this dissertation's appreciation for limitations, it is also important to note that in reconstructing a racial geography of 1890s New Orleans, one faces a fundamental and insurmountable limitation. Though the 1890 US Census did note (as well as it possibly could) the claimed racial background of its citizens (organizing them into the idiosyncratic categories of "white, black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, Chinese, Japanese, or Indian"), the census records

were destroyed in a fire that ravaged the Commerce Building in Washington DC in 1921. When necessary, census records from the 1880s will be utilized to offer conjecture as to neighborhood racial demographics in the period roughly ten to twenty years later.

The figures below will be referred to in my mappings of the individual stories. The first, a chart from Blassingame's study, utilizes Louisiana Board of Health annual reports to collect information on late-nineteenth century racial demographics in New Orleans (Fig. 3.3). The second figure, from Campanella, illustrates the relative number of free persons of color to enslaved persons in various wards of the city (Fig. 3.4). The third figure – and the most fascinating – represents an attempt on Campanella's part to reconstruct where majority-black neighborhoods existed in New Orleans at the end of the nineteenth century by using neighborhood information from the 1930s and mapping it alongside 1881 locations of historically-black Protestant churches (Fig. 3.5). According to Campanella, information on locations of black neighborhoods in postbellum New Orleans is "hard to come by, but mapping out the locations of black churches in 1881 and overlaying them on much later (1939) racial distribution data indicate that the patterns remained fairly stable over this fifty-year span" (229). So, while this racial mapping is an inexact science, the findings appear stable enough to justify certain historical claims as we move through "The Goodness of Saint Rocque," "Little Miss Sophie," and "Titee."

All three of these stories take place in what Dunbar-Nelson refers to as the Third District (formerly the Third Municipality of the city), a space that consists of the old "Creole Faubourgs" (Fig. 3.6). Currently part of the city's seventh district, the Third District is made up of the Seventh and Eighth Wards – particularly those parts above St. Claude Avenue, a street that marks the boundary between the Faubourg Marigny (closer to the Mississippi River) and the St.

Table 1. Population of New Orleans, 1860–80.

	1860		1870		1875		1880	
Districts	Negro	White	Negro	White	Negro	White	Negro	White
1	6,226	51,129	13,991	42,565	12,464	39,939	14,126	43,282
2	8,956	30,218	13,158	29,475	12,087	27,278	13,301	31,241
3	6,052	38,273	11,466	29,270	15,214	30,984	11,856	33,727
4	2,840	24,981	5,737	28,101	6,213	29,684	6,910	30,592
5	.....	.....	3,017	3,802	4,604	4,531	3,835	5,020
6	.....	.....	3,126	7,710	4,471	10,570	4,078	11,954
7	.....	.....	.....	.....	2,594	2,806	3,125	3,043
Totals	24,074	144,601	50,495	140,923	57,647	145,792	57,647	158,859

SOURCE: *Louisiana Board of Health,* Annual Report, *1883. The population of 1880 is slightly smaller than the figure reported in the 1880 census, but I have accepted it in most cases because the board reported the population by districts.*

Fig. 3.3: Racial Demographics of New Orleans by City District, 1860-1880. (John W. Blassingame. *Black New Orleans: 1860-1880*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973. p.221)

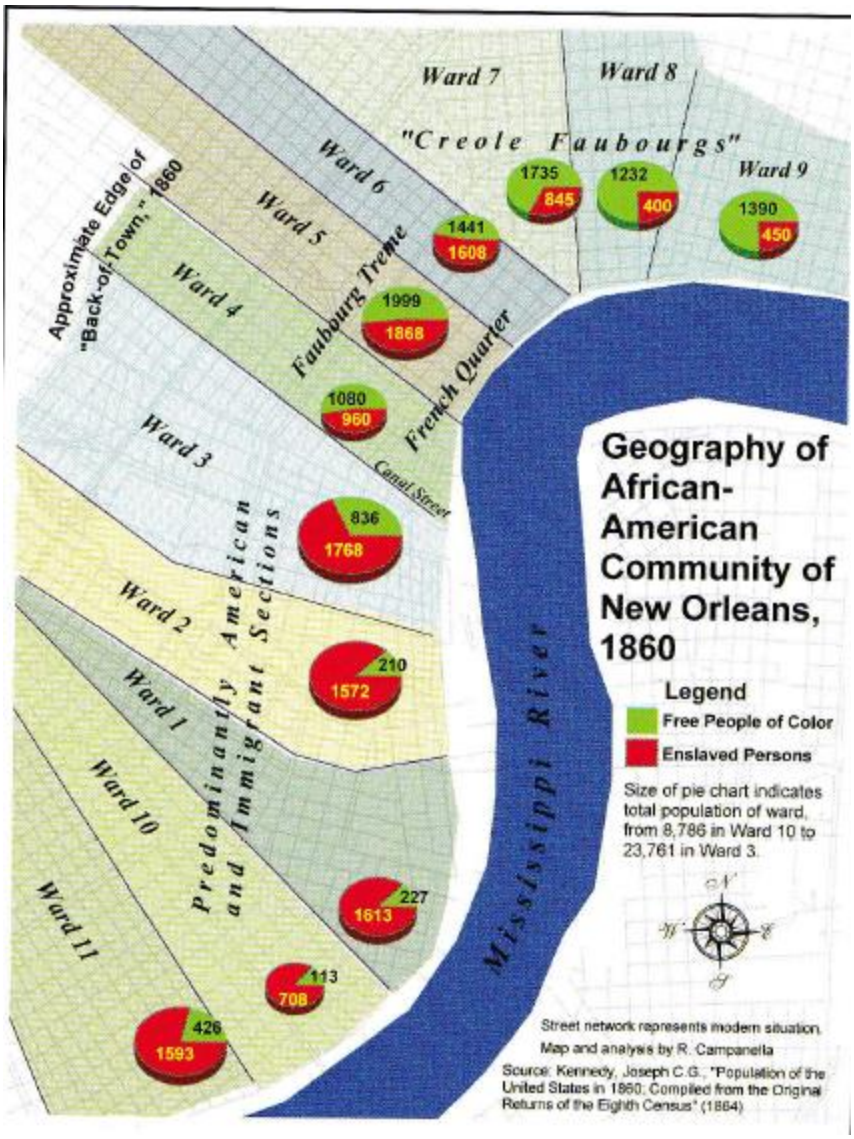
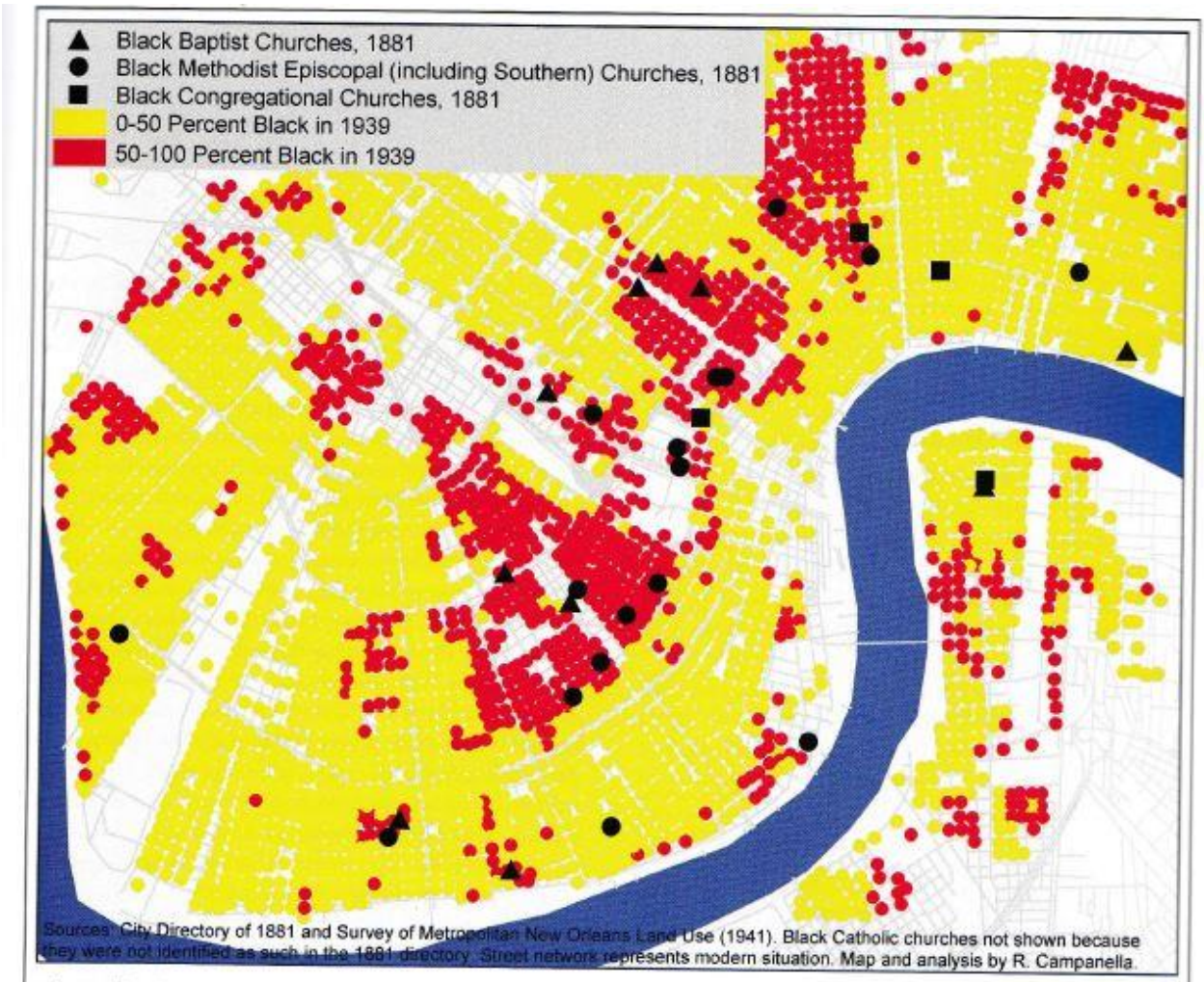


Fig. 3.4: Comparative Populations: Free Persons of Color to Enslaved Persons, 1860. (Richard Campanella. *Geographies of New Orleans.* Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2006, p.298)



Where did African Americans live in late nineteenth-century New Orleans? Detailed data are hard to come by, but mapping out the locations of black churches in 1881 and overlaying them on much-later (1939) racial distribution data indicate that the patterns remained fairly stable over this fifty-year span. Most black New Orleanians lived in the back-of-town, with some residing along the riverfront and others in pockets throughout uptown and downtown. Note the positioning of Congregational churches mostly in the lower city, Methodist Episcopal churches in the front edge of the back-of-town, and Baptist churches in the very rear. Reasons are unclear. (Black Catholic churches are not shown because they were not identified as such in the source material. Most would have been located in the lower city.) *Map and analysis by author based on 1881 City Directory and 1941 Survey of Metropolitan New Orleans Land Use.*

Fig. 3.5: Attempt at Reconstructing Location of Nineteenth-Century Black Neighborhoods in New Orleans (Campanella, p.299)

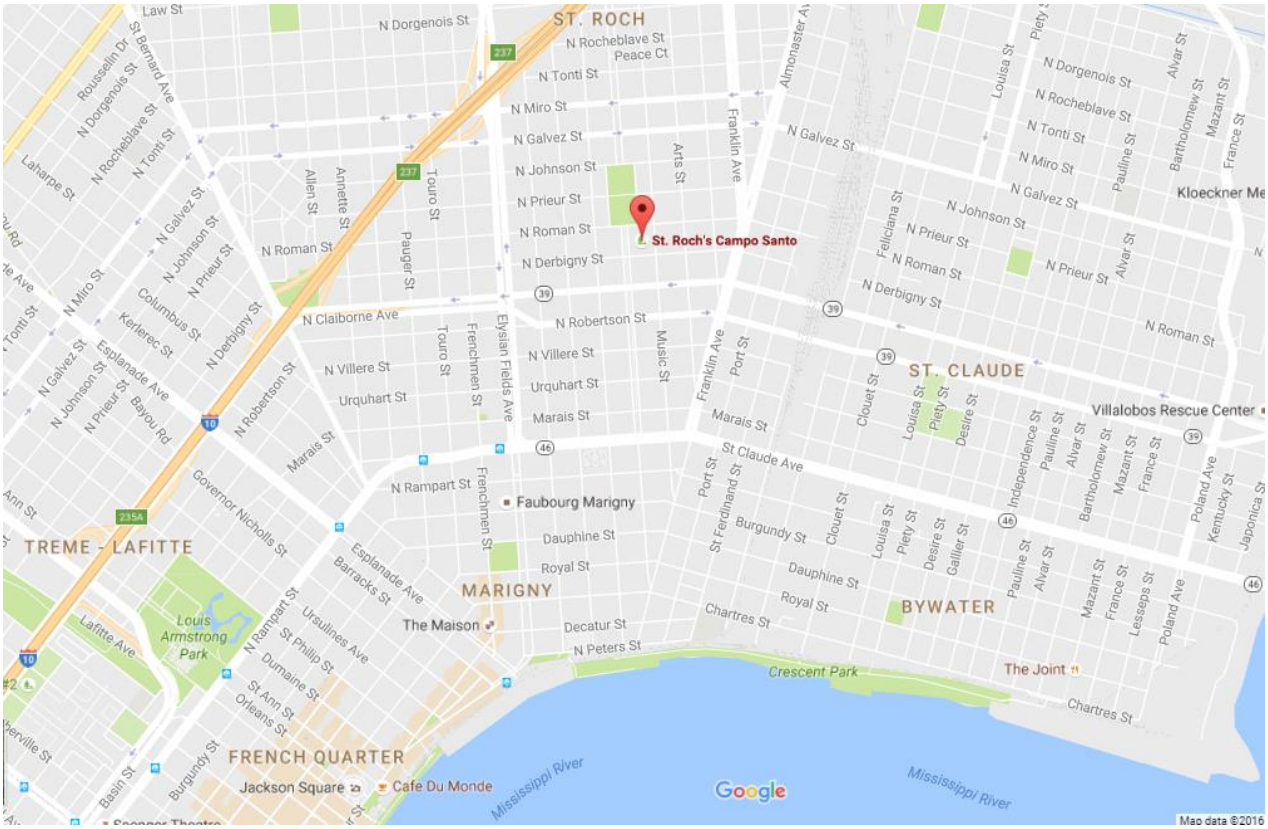


Fig. 3.6: Location of the St. Roch neighborhood relative to the Marigny, the French Quarter, and Treme.

Roch neighborhood.[18] This neighborhood, according to Blassingame's statistics, had a population of 2,594 black residents compared to 2,806 whites in 1875 and by 1880 had a population of 3,125 black residents compared to 3,043 whites. Contrasted against the other district divisions used in Blassingame's organizational method, this area constitutes the only district of the city that had a higher black population than white population in 1880. If we turn to Campanella's "Geography of African-American Community of New Orleans, 1860" (Fig. 3.4), we find that the Seventh Ward and the Eighth Ward in the year before the start of the Civil War had the highest percentage of free persons of color in the city and the highest percentage of free persons of color compared to the enslaved black population. Campanella's attempt to reconstruct postbellum racial geographies holds to the same pattern, demonstrating that the wedge-shaped area between Esplanade and Elysian Fields had not only a number of black Protestant churches in 1881 but that later population patterns from the 1930s seem to indicate a majority-black population in these neighborhoods during the preceding decades as well.[19] This higher black population, however, drops off when we cross over Elysian Fields into the St. Roch neighborhood, where the percentages fall back down to 0-50 percent black in 1939. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that this Third District – the setting of the three stories under consideration – represents (according to the geographic data) a high percentage of the black population of New Orleans in the 1880s and 1890s, as well as a high percentage of free persons of color during the antebellum era compared to other neighborhoods in the city.

It is within the Third District that Dunbar-Nelson opens her short story collection. "The

[18] For whatever reason, Alice Dunbar-Nelson refers to the St. Roch neighborhood using the spelling St. Rocque. No other description of the neighborhood I have found in the archival records makes use of this spelling. For the sake of clarity, I will use the spelling St. Rocque when referring to the fictional neighborhood of the short stories and St. Roch when I am referring to geographic data about the actual neighborhood.

[19] We must be cautious about Campenella's use of only Protestant churches, since a number of majority-black Catholic churches also existed at this period in New Orleans.

Goodness of Saint Rocque," the story that lends its name to the entire work, opens with the veiled figure of Manuela rushing eastward down Marais Street and across St. Rocque Avenue whispering to herself her own cartographic trajectory (Fig. 3.7): "Across wide St. Rocque Avenue she hastened. 'Two blocks to the river and one below—' she repeated to herself breathlessly" (6). There she finds the Wizened One, an old Creole woman who demands in broken French and English, "An' fo' w'y you come here? Assiez-là, ma'amzelle" (8). At the advice of the Wizened One, and hoping to win the heart of her beloved Theophilé from the "blonde and petite" Claralie, Manuela rushes to the chapel of St. Rocque to counter Claralie's own prayers for Theophilé's affections. "Dat light girl," warns the Wizened One, "yaas, she mek' nouvena in St. Rocque fo' hees love" (8-9). We find out as the story progresses that Theophilé is "a Creole young man," but (as was noted in Chapter One) the term can hardly account for a determinate race (15). We end the story with a variety of interpretative responses presented to us to explain Theophilé's decision to marry Manuela – Manuela's coy silence, Claralie's denial that she ever was in love with Theophilé, Theophilé's denial that he ever loved anyone besides Manuela and that his attentions to Claralie were only meant to tease Manuela, and the Wizened One's opinion that her folk-magic charm did its work. Yet none of these represents the final word on the matter. Instead, the narrative voice zooms back to a metaphysical level to note, "But St. Rocque knows, for he is a good saint, and if you believe in him and are true and good, and make your nouvenas with a clean heart, he will grant your wish" (16). This tangle of interpretations at the end of the short story and the mischievous and somewhat magical privilege placed upon the saint's intercessory power on behalf of Manuela locates us yet again at the crossroads between what information is given us and what information is withheld from us as readers. These final

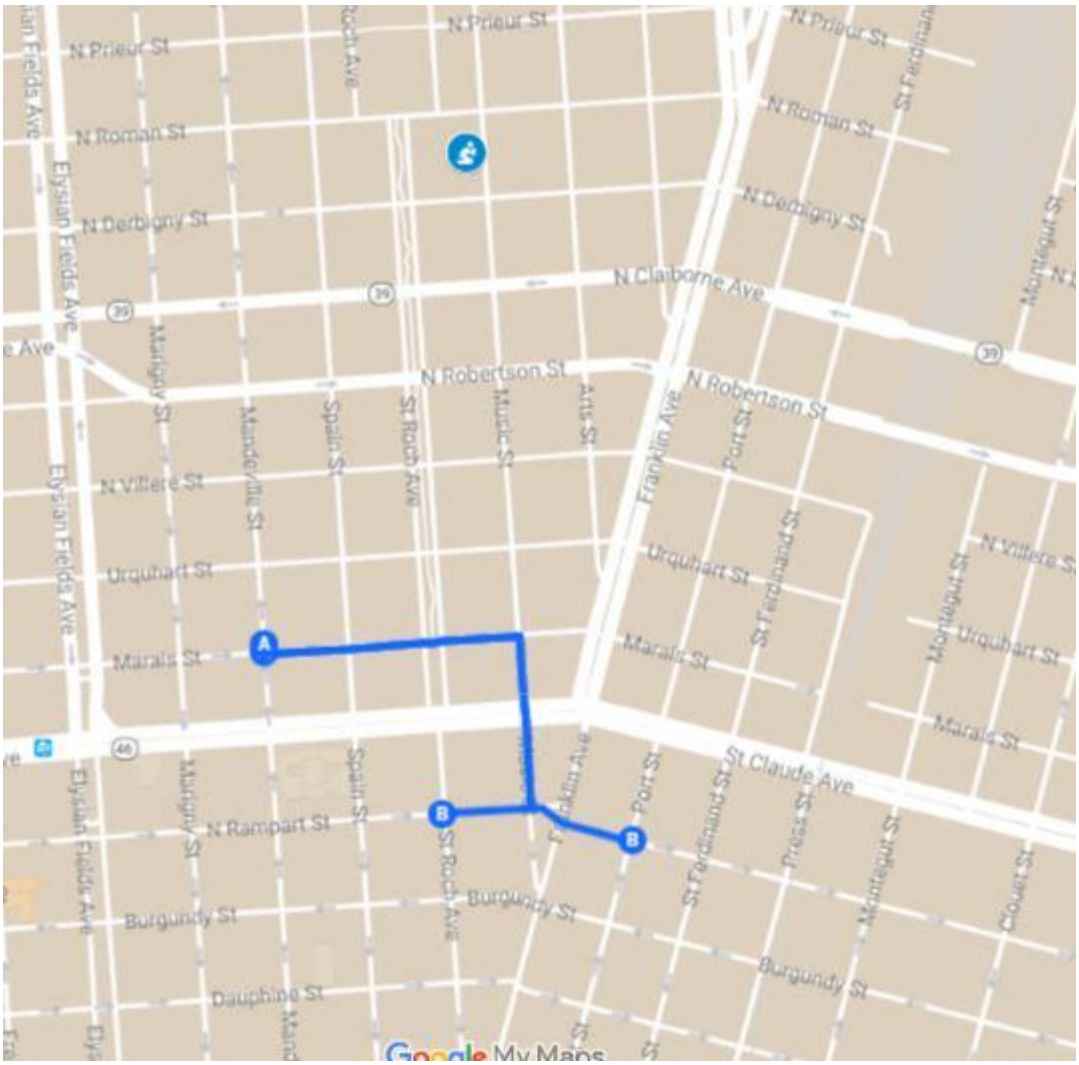


Fig. 3.7 ("The Goodness of Saint Rocque"): Proposed trajectory for Manuela's route to the house of the Wizened One. The Kneeling Man marks the site of the chapel of St. Roch. Whether we interpret Manuela's "one [block] below" to mean downriver or back downtown determines whether we chart her route east down Rampart or back west. The second option seems less likely, given that she could have reached the location by simply turning right from Marais onto St. Roch Avenue. [Caveat for all maps: Though streets in downtown New Orleans have remained relatively unchanged since the late nineteenth century, the maps presented here, for the sake of clarity, chart rough locations onto the contemporary locations of these streets.]

lines keep the reader in a space of openness, and rather than closing down a definitive meaning, leave us to live within the mystery of the text. Such a move can be linked to local color's attraction to provisionality as a mode of interpretation and of knowledge.

To racially mark Manuela, Claralie, Theophilé, or the Wizened One remains a complicated task, even given the information about the spaces through which they move. Gloria Hull, in keeping with her insistence upon the araciality of Dunbar-Nelson's fiction, asserts that the darkness of Manuela, who finds herself pitted in a contest of love against the blondeness and fairness of Claralie, belongs in "the romantic tradition of color-contrasted heroines popular with Byron, Sir Walter Scott, and others" (*CSP* 51). [20] Dunbar-Nelson describes the picnic outing at the beginning of the story at the fashionable gathering site of Milneburg-on-the-Lake (near Pontchartrain) as a gathering of Creoles, so we might assume that the three members of our love triangle all fall into that category (Fig. 3.8). However, whether they are Creoles of color remains ambiguous even when we attempt to historicize Milneburg-on-the-Lake, a space famous for entertaining New Orleanians of various races and serving as a cultural exchange point credited with early developments in jazz music (Hersch 81). The Wizened One might initially appear to be easier to racially categorize – the text describes her as "a little, wizened yellow woman" (8) – but this yellowness becomes difficult to read in light of the fact that the preceding paragraph offers two other references to yellowing as part of the Wizened One's home – the "yellow-washed" step and the "bare, yellow-washed floor" of the house (7). While we might provisionally mark the Wizened One as being of a different race than Manuela, it seems highly unlikely that there is a racial differentiation between Manuela, Theophilé, and Claralie given the way they

[20] Abbreviations for Hull's works are as follows: *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* (WADN), *Color, Sex, and Poetry* (CSP), and the Introduction to *Give Us Each Day: The Diary of Alice-Dunbar Nelson* (GUED).

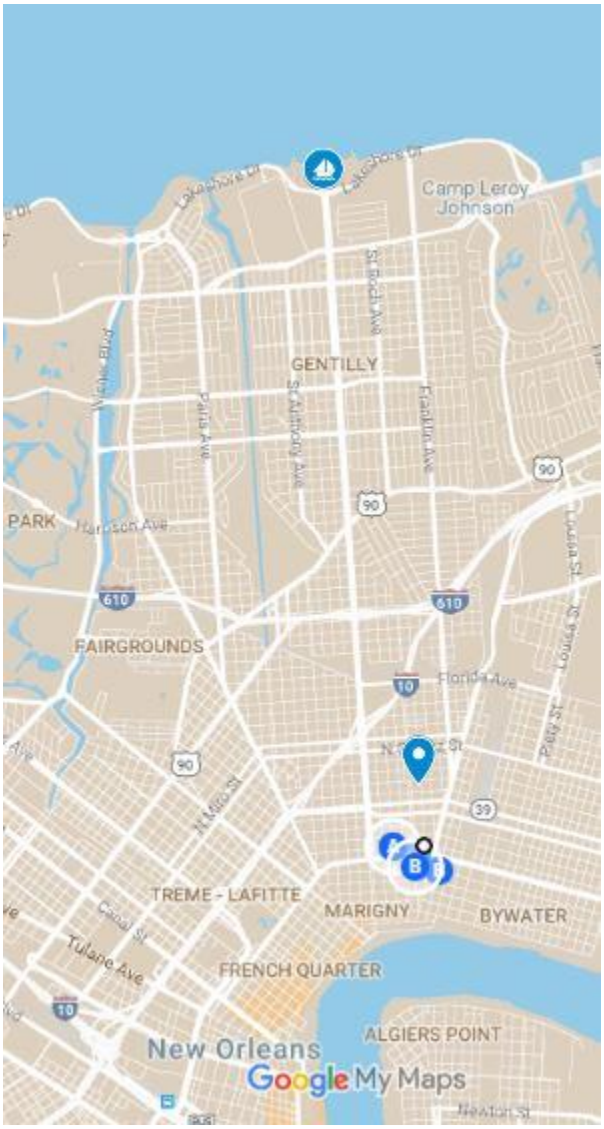


Fig. 3.8: ("The Goodness of Saint Rocque") The blue tabs to the bottom of the map indicate Manuela's route and the location of St. Roch's chapel from the previous map. The Sailboat indicates the former location of Milneburg-on-the-Lake, the site of the Creole picnic.

interact socially. For instance, all are received as guests in the home of Theophilé's family. Even when we map this story upon a reconstructed racial geography of the neighborhoods adjacent to St. Roch Cemetery, it remains incredibly difficult to determine whether this set of characters is made up of white Creoles of Franco-Spanish descent, Creoles of color, or of individuals of mixed descent from a variety of New Orleanian communities.

A similar problem arises when we try to follow Little Miss Sophie, the eponymous heroine of another story in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, through the Third District and through her brief forays into the French Quarter. As we begin "Little Miss Sophie," Dunbar-Nelson gives us a sense of what kind of neighborhood Sophie inhabits: "A miserable little room in a miserable little cottage in one of the squalid streets of the Third District that nature and the city fathers seem to have forgotten" (138). Though Sophie rents this room from "an unkempt little Creole woman," it remains unclear whether Sophie herself might claim Creole heritage (138). In a surprising move, we discover that on her way back from her factory work, she drops in to pray not at a church in her own neighborhood but in "the Jesuit Church," the common way New Orleanians in the nineteenth century referred to the Jesuit-run Immaculate Conception Catholic Church on Baronne Street (on the "American" side of Canal Street) and separated from Sophie's Third District Cottage by the entire French Quarter (139). The description of the statue of the Virgin Mary "away up in the niche, far above the golden dome where the Host was" (147) also matches the altar structure of Immaculate Conception. Here she witnesses the wedding of her former romantic partner, Louis Neale. Given the associations of the neighborhood surrounding Immaculate Conception with business and commerce, a local reader might logically assume that a gulf of class (if not of race) separates Sophie and her ex-lover. A later reference to this church being in "the busiest, most bustling part of the town, its fresco and bronze and iron quaintly

suggestive of mediaeval times" confirms that we are almost certainly in the business district on the "American" side of Canal Street (Fig. 7). Although it would not be impossible for a woman of color to enter a church in this area of town, early descriptions of the tiny, hunched, and black-attired Sophie certainly mark her as a peculiar figure in these spaces. Complicating the racial matters further, we see Sophie board a streetcar on Claiborne and overhear news about Neale from two men. Here, Sophie is either passing for white on a segregated streetcar or is, in fact, a Franco-Spanish white Creole of dark complexion. Either way, the men refer to her (not knowing she is eavesdropping on their conversation) as Neale's "dusky-eyed fiancée" from his "little Creole love affair" (145). Within the context of this conversation, the men also note that because of the loss of a distinctive Roman ring that signifies Neale's legitimacy as the heir to his uncle's fortune, Neale risks being disinherited entirely. The problem, for them, is described as "this difficulty of identification" (144), similar to the very difficulty of racial identification we must confront as readers. Sophie then rushes down Royal Street through the Christmas Eve réveillon – a local custom Dunbar-Nelson does not elucidate for readers – to redeem this ring from a pawnshop but dies before she can return the ring to Neale (Fig. 3.9). For many critics of this short story, such as James Nagel, racially marking Sophie has come down to a matter of trying to make questionable inferences based on her black clothing and her class position. Though it appears more likely here than in "The Goodness of Saint Rocque" that the heroine is of mixed racial background, there is no indication (as Nagel supposes) that the story takes place in the context of the antebellum system of plaçage or that the relationship between Neale and Sophie is not simply the callous dalliance of a man of privilege with a beautiful yet poor woman he has no intention of marrying. Nagel's rush to fix the short story too firmly into a historical period and

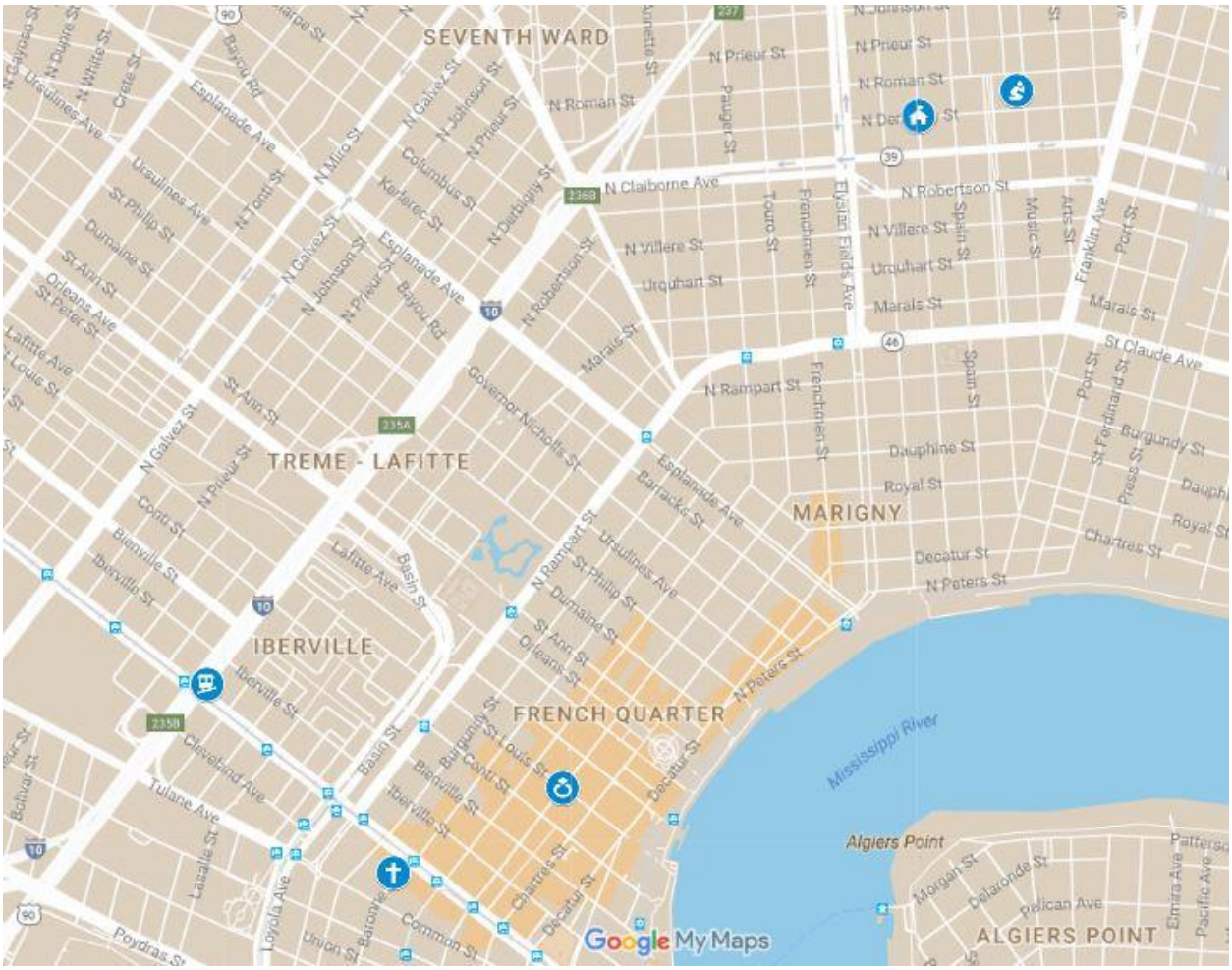


Fig. 3.9: ("Little Miss Sophie") The symbols mark the real or proposed locations of the following. Streetcar: The route of the Claiborne Streetcar follows present-day I-10 to the east. Cross: The site of the "Jesuit Church," Immaculate Conception. Ring: Royal Street, where Sophie goes to attempt to redeem Neale's ring. House: Indicates neighborhood where Sophie lives. Kneeling Man: The Chapel of St. Roch.

into an unambiguous racial framework not only limits the expressive indeterminacy of the text but also leads him to false conclusions (i.e. that Sophie is a victim of the system of plaçage).

Geographical specificity, paired with racial ambiguity, also factors into Dunbar-Nelson's "Titee." His story opens – like the previous two stories – in a clearly-marked section of the Third District, with our young hero standing on Elysian Fields and musing about whether or not the winter wind will bring a rare snowfall (Fig. 3.10). The narrator informs us of Titee's subpar performance at school but immediately assures readers of the boy's intelligence. In fact, Titee can be read as the local *par excellence* – one so embedded into the rituals, folkways, and patterns of community life that he operates as a living vessel of local knowledge. If Cable's Frowenfeld in *The Grandissimes* finds himself ever operating with a deficit of local knowledge, we find in Titee a kind of anti-Frowenfeld, a young man who knows how to read the book of his world:

> But there was nothing in natural history that Titee did not know. He could dissect a butterfly or a mosquito hawk, and describe their parts as accurately as a spectacled student with a scalpel and microscope could talk about a cadaver. The entire Third District, with its swamps and canals and commons and railroad sections, and its wondrous, crooked, tortuous streets, was an open book to Titee. There was not a nook or corner that he did not know or could not tell of. There was not a bit of gossip among the gamins, little Creole and Spanish fellows, with dark skins and lovely eyes, like spaniels, that Titee could not tell of. He knew just exactly when it was time for crawfish to be plentiful down in the Claiborne and Marigny canals; just when a poor, breadless fellow might get a job in the big bone-yard and fertilising factory, out on the railroad track; and as for the levee, with its ships and schooners and sailors, how he could revel in them! The wondrous ships, the pretty little schooners, where the foreign-looking sailors lay on long moonlight nights, singing to their guitars and telling great stories —, all these things and more could Titee tell of. He had been down to the Gulf, and out on its treacherous waters through the Eads jetties on a fishing-smack with some jolly brown sailors, and could interest the whole school-room in the talk-lessons, if he chose. (212-4)

This wonderful passage illustrates that, though he lacks the kind of bookish intelligence required by his schoolteacher on Marigny Street, he also functions as a receptacle of knowledge about the natural environment – its seasonal cycles, its currents and its tides. To top it all off (lest

Fig. 3.10: ("Titee") The symbols mark the real or proposed location of the following. The Man: Rough location of where Titee stands on Elysian Fields as the story opens. The Book: Rough location of Titee's school. Train: Railroad section of the Third District. Kneeling Man: The Chapel of St. Roch. Cow: Intersection of Elysian Fields Avenue with the Florida Avenue Canal (called the "Marigny Canal" in the text) – roughly around the area where Titee finds the old man and the cow.

we frame him as a kind of Pan-like figure from the pre-modern green world), Titee also possesses knowledge of local economic cycles tied to the realities of his working-class community in the Third District, a community located amid railroads and factories and international economies linked to the wider world by the Mississippi River, from which the Eads Jetties open out into the ocean (Fig. 3.11). In addition to this economic knowledge, he also carries a body of local cultural knowledge – the linguistic peculiarities of sailors and street urchins.

Marking Titee racially poses just as difficult a task as identifying the race of Manuela and Sophie. Though his family speaks in French-infused dialect, Titee's speech remains unmarked, perhaps a sign of the new generation losing its linguistic particularities. While his mother peppers her remarks with *ma foi*, Titee, on the other hand, utters statements to himself such as "Wish 'twas summer" (214) and goes to school with children who intersperse their schoolyard bullying with words like "fer" and "yer" (217). When Titee eventually goes missing, injuring himself while trying to provide food for an impoverished old man he has adopted possessively as his "grandpa" (223), his family finds him along the Marigny Canal (Fig. 3.10). In the original version of the story published in *Violets*, Dunbar-Nelson does not mark the parents' speech with dialect and – most significantly – she kills off Titee in the final line, having him succumb to a cold that he catches while injured in the rain in one of his attempts to bring the old man food. In the earlier version of the story, Titee is buried in St. Rocque cemetery, fixing him permanently in the neighborhood he knew so well. Yet again, none of the historical or geographical details of the area sheds much new light on our attempts to racially mark Titee, and, in fact, Dunbar-Nelson's moves as an author seem designed to complicate rather than clarify the matter. With these three stories – "The Goodness of Saint Rocque," "Little Miss Sophie," and "Titee" – we see the

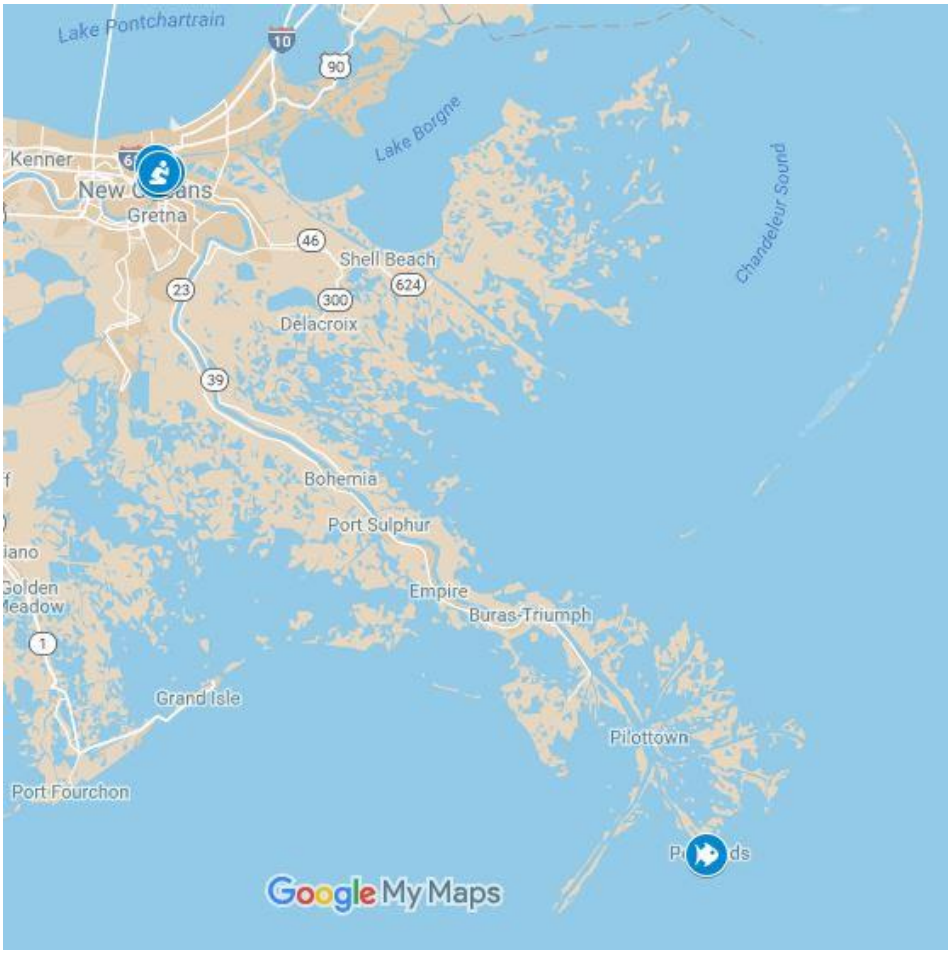


Fig. 3.11: ("Titee") Location of the Third District of New Orleans (Kneeling Man) relative to the Eads Jetties (Fish) where Titee has gone on fishing trips with "jolly brown sailors."

interplay, familiar to readers of local color literature, between a radical realistic specificity and a kind of playful withholding of information, an aesthetics of ambiguity that places us perhaps not so much in a "difficulty of identification" but in a space of flux and instability like that of the characters of the texts themselves.

Thus we see the benefits of mapping local color insofar as it offers us insights about thematic qualities already inherent within the world of the text. The gulf between Sophie and the world occupied by her former lover can be better appreciated when one considers the geographic distance between her Third District cottage and the bustling world of the business elites across Canal, where Sophie prays in the Jesuit Church. Mapping the distance between New Orleans and the Eads Jetties that Titee has visited gives us an insight into how wide the horizons of his world extend. Yet these analyses also demonstrate the limitations of mapping as a form of textual analysis, as even the most careful attempt to reconstruct historical and geographic data still leaves us with claims that must be cautious and provisional lest they risk forcing a fixed interpretation upon a text – about, for instance, the race of Manuela in "The Goodness of Saint Rocque" – that the text itself might actively resist. The temptation of historicist certainty must yield, then, before texts that operate from an aesthetics and thematics of ambiguity.

Like a Quinine Pill in Jelly: Dunbar-Nelson's Commentary on Race in Fiction

In an early letter to Paul Laurence Dunbar, Alice Dunbar wrote frankly on the subject of how she thought about the representations of racial questions in literature:

> Now as for getting away from one's race – well, I haven't much liking for those writers that wedge the Negro problem and social equality and long dissertations on the Negro in general in their stories. It is too much like a quinine pill in jelly . . . Somehow, when I start a story I always think of my folk characters as simple human beings, not as types or a race or an idea, and I seem to be on more friendly terms with them. (qtd. in Xavier 441)

The remark seems to indicate that Dunbar-Nelson finds literature involved in the politics of race healthy and beneficial for the black community – hence the use of the medical analogy (the quinine pill) – but that such political activism appears unnecessarily didactic when incorporated too ham-fistedly into art. Taking their cue from passages like the one above, critics starting with Gloria Hull have accepted Dunbar-Nelson's political quietism in her fiction as a given. Many arguments over the racial ambiguity in her literary output are tied to critical anxieties over how an author whose own life and political activism seemed deeply invested in questions of racial justice could bracket those considerations in her fiction. Yet I will argue that a biographical and archival consideration of Dunbar-Nelson's writings reveals that her actual treatment of race and locality in her fiction was far more complex than the approach she claims in her letter to Paul and, as seen in the previous section, far more complex than mapping can reveal. This complexity is, in part, tied to her aesthetic goals to destabilize clear racial signifiers but also connected to her political commitments as a moderate racial reformer. Therefore, we must check our critical impulses to mark too quickly the characters of *The Goodness of St. Rocque* as part of particular racial communities, despite the temptation to do so given the short story collection's origins during the era of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), a legal decision not only rooted in the *locus* of New Orleans but also a decision concerned with the legibility of the body and its ability to be racially interpreted in a definitive manner.

What we know of the early years of Alice Ruth Moore's life shows that her origins are characterized by a racial indeterminacy similar to that which we find in her fiction. Her mother Patricia Moore worked as a slave on a plantation in Opelousas, Louisiana, and – like many slaves in the region – had been removed by her owner to Texas during the final years of the Civil War and there kept for a time in ignorance of her own legal status as an emancipated citizen.

Recalling for Paul Laurence Dunbar her mother's account of the slaveholder telling the former slaves what he had withheld from them, Alice describes her mother and her companions as "indignant and unforgiving slaves, for most of them were of mixed Indian blood" (qtd. in *CSP* 33). The details of her father's life are scarce, though scholarly consensus holds that, given Alice's own dark-red hair and her ability to pass as white, Joseph Moore might have had a substantial portion of white blood or himself have been a white man (*CSP* 34). Born in New Orleans in 1875, Alice grew up with a sense of herself as separate from certain aspects of black American culture, and this consciousness of herself as separated would inform a great deal of her later literary career. The year after publishing her first collection, *Violets and Other Tales*, at the age of twenty, she moved North with her mother and sister to join her brother-in-law in West Medford, Massachusetts (*CSP* 40). During that period near Boston, young Alice was present at the dedication of the monument to Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment in Boston Common (*CSP* 41).[21] The following year found her in Brooklyn working as a schoolteacher and coping with unruly students by cultivating a powerful persona. Once a student asked her if she regularly exercised at a gym. Her response: "Yes, and I'm willing to undertake to knock you down if you want" (qtd. in *CSP* 42). Throughout this period she maintained a correspondence with Paul Laurence Dunbar, a man she had never met in person but who had been attracted to an early poem of hers published in a Boston periodical (*CSP* 43). Little more than two years after her departure from New Orleans, Alice Ruth Moore married Dunbar in the early spring of 1898 and moved with him to Washington DC (*GUED* 467). The marriage to Paul

[21] Paul Laurence Dunbar, her future husband, would later offer a paean to Shaw and the regiment in a poem bearing the colonel's name: "Why was it that the thunder voice of Fate / Should call thee, studious, from the classic groves / Where calm-eyed Pallas with still footstep roves, / And charge thee seek the turmoil of the state? / What bade thee hear the voice and rise elate, / Leave home and kindred and thy spicy loaves, / To lead th' unlettered and despised droves / To manhood's home and thunder at the gate?" (221).

gained her access to a world of turn-of-the-century black elites, and her letters to her husband continue to indicate her sense of herself as separate from lower-class black culture, urging Paul, for instance, to avoid "inferior" black artists and musicians while traveling and to take up his lodgings instead at a "first class *white* hostelry" (qtd. in *CSP* 44).

Yet operating in tension with these desires for separation from segments of the black population she considered beneath her was her sustained activism, her commitment to social justice, and her real though often complicated desire to engage with these very communities. In 1929, long after her separation from Dunbar, her brief second marriage to the doctor Henry Arthur Callis, and her marriage in 1916 to her third and final husband the journalist Robert J. Nelson, Dunbar-Nelson composed her essay "Brass Ankles Speaks" as a rebuke to a black community unwilling to accommodate the voice of a "brass ankles" – a term she defines as being "[w]hite enough to pass for white, but with a darker family background, a real love for the mother race, and no desire to be numbered among the white race" (311). In this essay she inveighs against dark-skinned children at her elementary school for being the ones to enforce color line distinctions and who apparently bullied her mercilessly (313). Even as an adult, she notes that these lines remain in place for her:

> And yet, in spite of all the tragedy of my childhood and young womanhood, I had not been able to develop that color sense. When I say this to my darker friends, they simply laugh at me. They may like me personally; they may even become my very good friends; but there is always a barrier, a veil – nay, rather a vitrified glass wall, which I can neither break down, batter down, nor pierce. (317)

Dunbar-Nelson goes on in the essay to note that despite her tireless social activism efforts in the black community and even her attempts at putting on historical and political pageants for black audiences, she finds herself again and again coming up against a barrier that separates her from their lives and experiences. Though at times the essay veers into what seems an excessive attack

on black treatment of those with mixed racial background, one senses a true anxiety and hurt at the heart of Dunbar-Nelson's argument. This voice seems quite different and far more politically-articulate than that of the twenty-year-old who wrote an apologetic, self-effacing introduction to the collection *Violets and Other Tales*. Yet as Dunbar-Nelson offers us a brief racial and autobiographical accounting of herself here, we find her admitting that these anxieties were present in her mind even in her early career, though they rarely come across as explicitly in her fiction. Later short stories such as "The Stones of the Village" – with its depiction of the bookish Creole of color Victor Grabért struggling to maintain a foothold in black and white social worlds – took up these anxieties more explicitly. In fact, it is significant that in "The Stones of the Village" access to literacy at a New Orleans bookstore makes the protagonist not only socially whiter but physically whiter: "Victor had grown pale from much reading. Like a shadow of the old book-seller he sat day after day pouring into some dusty yellow-paged book, and his mind was a queer jumble of ideas" (8). Yet such works garnered little popularity at the time they were published, and in 1900, *Atlantic Monthly* editor Bliss Perry dismissed Dunbar-Nelson's suggestion that "The Stones of the Village" could be reworked into a novel. The market, he claimed, was done with fiction of the color line such as the short stories that had been published by Charles Chesnutt in the *Atlantic* over the previous decade (*CSP* 19). For further evidence of the double-bind she found herself in, we can look at her failed attempts to get her works adapted for the cinema. Oscar Micheaux, an early black filmmaker, passed on her suggestion that *The Goodness of St. Rocque* be made into a film (*GUED* 74). While we do not know why Micheaux decided against pursuing the project, we do know why a month later the Real Art Pictures Corporation turned down a screenplay from Dunbar-Nelson. According to Dunbar-Nelson, her script was rejected because it was found to be "not distinctively colored enough" (*GUED* 97).[22]

[22] Micheaux also adapted local colorist Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* twice for film

Dunbar-Nelson's purported aristocratic bearing further complicated her racial anxieties and her sense of in-betweenness. Critics have at times overstated this regal, *grande dame* bearing, though these portraits do resonate with newspaper accounts that describe her presence as "distinctively aristocratic" (*GUED* 23) and those that praise her "stately bearing," describing her hair done up in "the princess style" (qtd. in *CSP* 44). Critics have also perhaps over-read Dunbar-Nelson's own exhaustion at having to give presentations and lectures at mediocre venues as an indication of her lack of empathy for socioeconomic groups she perceived as being beneath her. For instance, in a diary entry from November 4, 1928, she muses that "It shall always be my luck, it seems, to miss the Big occasions and be starred at the tiny, bum, back yard affairs" (*GUED* 30). Though much of this emphasis on a kind of aesthetic and social conservatism on Dunbar-Nelson's part comes from Hull's initial biographical work, Hull reminds us that a great deal of Dunbar-Nelson's aristocratic mien had to do more with upbringing than an actual position in the black upper-class: "Her aristocratic bearing obscured the fact that she was a genuine, down-to-earth person, who, when she allowed herself, enjoyed all types of activities and people, such as drinking black-market Italian wine and playing cards with her 'rough-necky' friends" (*CSP* 99). In her journalistic writing for such columns as *Une Femme Dit* (Pittsburgh; *Courier*) *As In a Looking Glass* (Washington DC; *Eagle*), and *So It Seems to Alice Dunbar-Nelson* (Pittsburgh; *Courier*), she attempts to offer insight into the black experience of her period, though critics have insistently turned from these writings back to the question of why the racial critique we find in the journalism does not appear in her earlier fictional output.

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and might have bought the rights to *The Marrow of Tradition* from him as well. Curiously enough, both texts are deeply concerned with the color line, and both represent the kind of work that Bliss Perry had told Dunbar-Nelson was no longer popular. For more information on Micheaux's work with Chesnutt, see Susan Gillman's "Micheaux's Chesnutt" in *PMLA* 114.5 (1999): 1080-1088.

What makes this question about racial ambiguity even more significant from a biographical standpoint is that the early collection of sketches, short stories, and reviews of *Violets and Other Tales* (1895) and the more polished *The Goodness of St. Rocque* (1899) were published during the era immediately preceding and following the Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Under the strategic organization of the Comité des Citoyens (a New Orleans society for racial equality made up of members of various races), Homer Plessy boarded a whites-only railroad car headed from New Orleans across Lake Pontchartrain to the town of Covington. Such strategic protest was an intentional and carefully crafted act, designed to create a challenge to the existing legal order. Like Dunbar-Nelson, Plessy came from a mixed-racial background, and like Dunbar-Nelson, he could pass for white if the situation required. With the Supreme Court's decision in the case, legal segregation remained part of the rule of law and continued to place peculiar burdens upon public officials about the proper reading and interpretation of the racialized body. Coupled with this were the anxieties that spun out from the indeterminacy of the bodies – especially of citizens of ambiguous racial background – and how the nation-state's attempts to interpret bodily signifiers came up against the limitations of rigid models of racial categorization.

Dunbar-Nelson herself knew well the bizarre nature of this interpretative project that followed in the wake of *Plessy v. Ferguson* – one similar to what the White League had tried to accomplish in their forced segregation of the academy we find in George Washington Cable's *Strange True Stories*. Not only was Dunbar-Nelson connected to the Supreme Court case via her acquaintance with one of the lawyers for Plessy, Comité des Citoyens member Louis Martinet (whom she had known at Straight College, now Dillard University), but she often found herself in positions where the indeterminacy of her body left her outside of clear legal and social

categories (Ewell 296). In "Brass Ankles Speaks," she recounts how during her service work during World War I, she

> came into headquarters from a particularly exhausting trip through the South. There I had twice been put off Jim Crow cars, because the conductor insisted that I was a white woman, and three times refused food in the dining-car, because the colored waiters, "tipped off" the white stewards. (320)

While one should be cautious about over-interpreting Dunbar-Nelson's writing through the lens of these biographical and archival details, they nevertheless indicate the historical context she found herself in regarding the marking of racial difference, a context which must be brought to bear upon the aesthetics of racial ambiguity we find in her fiction.

Instead of bracketing the historical conditions of her period and separating them from the aesthetic moves she makes in her writing – a critical decision that would reinforce the old dichotomy between her political and her aesthetic work – let us consider how the concept of indeterminacy informed not only Dunbar-Nelson's lived reality as a woman of mixed-race but also her fascination with an aesthetics of indeterminacy in her engagement with other writers. In her review of Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbo,* included in *Violets and Other Tales,* she takes the French novelist to task for exhausting the reader with too much detail:

> Nothing is left for the imagination to complete. The slightest turn of the hand, the smallest bit of tapestry and armor, — all, all is described until one's brain becomes weary with the scintillating flash of minutia. Such careful attention wearies and disappoints, and sometimes, instead of photographing the scenes indelibly upon the mental vision, there ensues only a confused mass of armor and soldiers, plains and horses. (65-6)

Implicit in this critique is an aesthetic criterion on the part of Dunbar-Nelson that a text should leave the reader space for creative and imaginative engagement with a narrative rather than force the "quinine pill" of political rhetoric down their throat. Given that the intentional withholding of details from a text is a well-attested attribute of Dunbar-Nelson's style, we should take this critique of Flaubert seriously as part of her theory of aesthetics and not dismiss it, with *Violets*,

as mere juvenalia. Starting from this point, we can gain insight into the fascinating interplay between radical specificity and radical ambiguity that intrigues and frustrates readers of her later fiction, especially *The Goodness of St. Rocque*.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Aesthetics of Ambiguity: "A Carnival Jangle," "Sister Josepha," and "The Praline Woman"

In his chapter on regional provisionality included in *Mapping Region in Early American Writing* (2015), John Funchion argues that "the aesthetics of regional writing, then, might be recast as one that does not aspire to eliciting a sense of totality but a provisional understanding of an interstitial space" (254). This appreciation for "regional provisionality," if we link it with a Gadamer-based hermeneutic that appreciates the limits of our own interpretive horizons, becomes a productive way for approaching what Alice Dunbar-Nelson accomplished artistically with *The Goodness of St. Rocque.* While the beginning of this chapter argued that even deeply historicist attention to the details of local knowledge cannot offer a full fathoming of Dunbar-Nelson's short stories, this section argues that this inability to fathom is precisely the point. The experience of living "within the riddle" (to borrow from Thomas Strychacz's assessment of Dunbar-Nelson's narrative style) is the aesthetic experience encouraged by *The Goodness of St. Rocque* as it positions us as readers in spaces of provisionality, flux, and ambiguity.

Nowhere is this sense of ambiguity and lack of fixed identity more present than in the whirling carnivalesque atmosphere of "A Carnival Jangle." Following the experiences of a young woman named Flo on Mardi Gras Day in New Orleans, the short story takes us (in typical Dunbar-Nelson fashion) down clearly delineated streets. We move from Canal Street down Bourbon and Toulouse and St. Peter and then up towards Rampart and into the squares of the "lower districts" in the Marigny near Washington Square – which Dunbar-Nelson marks with

this level of specificity: "In Washington Square, away down where Royal Street empties its stream of children great and small into the broad channel of Elysian Fields Avenue" (132). What is remarkable about this specificity is that it works as an aesthetic contrapuntal bass line to the treble line of the piece – its effervescence, its lack of stability as we whirl with the masquers whose identities change rapidly. As Thomas Strychacz has pointed out, Dunbar-Nelson even changes gender pronouns for Flo when she (at the behest of a masquer dressed as Mephistopheles) dons the attire of a male troubadour. The line immediately following the change of attire describes how "you" as an onlooker might have seen Flo as "a slender troubadour of lovely form, with a mandolin flung across his shoulder" (131). Yet, as Strychacz reveals,

> The narrator wants readers to switch places with an unknowing observer in the street, which is impossible, since we know more than the hypothetical observer . . . . We must hesitate, adjudicate between competing possibilities and adapt what seems an appropriate role – 'Oh, I see, I am supposed to be an onlooker in the street' – before ever recouping the knowledge that Flo is still really a girl. (85)

So not only is the story taking place within the confused press of the carnival crowds where fixed identities are in flux – our identities as readers of the text are also being placed in flux by the narrative voice. The narrator allows the reader no comfortable omniscient space from which to watch the chaos from above, as it were. We become, like Flo, lost among the Mardi Gras spectator-participants.

But lest this ambiguity be vaunted as an unmitigated positive quality of the work, we should also consider the darker elements that "A Carnival Jangle" brings to bear on this ambiguity. If, in stories like "La Juanita," where the Anglo-American Mercer's rescue of a regatta fleet makes him "lak one Frenchman," ambiguity between categories becomes a means for social triumph and new modes of integration between communities, we also find this ambiguity leading to isolation and violence, as in the case of Flo. The Mephisto figure (fulfilling

his function as devil) tempts her away from her friends "of that uncertain age that hovers between childhood and maturity" (128). Thus Flo is signaled in the text from the beginning as the uncertain figure, the one that hovers between states – even before she becomes a carnival cross-dresser. Futher, as an adolescent, she exists in an inherent state of in-betweenness. With dark and cynical echoes of literary *bildung*, the devil invites her to join him, that he might initiate her "into the mysteries of 'what life is'" (129). As Mardi Gras day progresses and the group works their way from Canal Street to those districts of the city inhabited in other tales by Manuela, Sophie, and Titee, the dissolution of fixed boundaries becomes even more radical. Capturing the destabilizing experience of Mardi Gras, the narrator tells us that in these dancing halls in the lower districts, a person may "dance and grow mad for joy, and never know who were your companions, and be yourself unknown" (132). Yet while this loss of self might be liberatory, it ultimately serves as the catalyst for Flo's death when a masquer dressed as an Indian chief confuses her for a personal enemy, Leon.

Significantly, the Indian masquer brings us back into the world of certainty after the kaleidoscopic world of carnival. Conversing with a companion, he argues:

> "I'd know that other form anywhere. It's Leon, see? I know those white hands like a woman's and that restless head. Ha!"
>
> "But there may be a mistake."
>
> "No, I'd know that one anywhere." (133)

It is the Indian masquer's certainty, his assumption that he can read signifiers into the body to determine identity, that leads to Flo's murder at his hands in the midst of the chaotic and ever-shifting dance. The interplay of certainty and uncertainty comes back to bear on the description of Flo's murder itself: "In a masked dance it is easy to give a death-blow between the shoulders. Two crowds meet and laugh and shout and mingle almost inextricably, and if a shriek of pain should arise, it is not noticed in the din, and when they part, if one should stagger and fall

bleeding to the ground, can any one tell who has given the blow?" (134). Even Flo's body becomes indeterminate in the final line of the story, as the narrator abandons specific nouns for describing her corpse. Her body becomes ultimately "a horrible something" that lies across a bed. While critics, often enraptured by the carnivalesque possibilities of "A Carnival Jangle" and the poststructuralist moves it makes in unsettling identity, praise the ambiguity here as a positive value, we must be careful to consider ambiguity as a neutral aesthetic tool that can be utilized to demonstrate both liberation and potential for chaos and violence.

In fact, ambiguity for "Sister Josepha" functions in a similarly negative fashion. Bill Hardwig argues in *Upon Provincialism* that the story of the plight of the racially-indeterminate nun and other stories in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* "rely on racial indeterminacy to create a sense of profound isolation and loneliness" and that the characters' "racial indeterminacy only heightens the realization that there is no clan to claim and protect them" (138). This follows logically as well from Fetterley and Pryse's calls for scholarly attention to Dunbar-Nelson's concern for the insignificant, the cast-aside, the queer (335). Hardwig, following Thomas Haddox's reading of the text, views "Sister Josepha" as a kind of anti-awakening, a mirror reverse of Kate Chopin's novel (137). Fetterley and Pryse similarly view the tragedy of Sister Josepha as contingent upon the world's insistence on racially marking her. Borrowing from the Christian language of "the world" for this convent story, Fetterley and Pryse argue that "To be in the 'world,' one must be 'raced,' and in a world where so much depends on race, not having a specific racial identity may be the worst oppression of all" (284).

Like "A Carnival Jangle," the narrative of "Sister Josepha" exists in a state of aesthetic flux between the fixity of life within the convent and Josepha's wonder at the almost kaleidoscopic whirl of shades and forms she finds in the outside world. Yet, we should not create

a strict dichotomy here that would establish Catholicism in this text as a rigid structure that blocks Josepha from experiencing a world charged with color and fascination. In fact, Josepha finds "a veritable fugue of colour" not in the secular world but in the interpenetration of the secular and the sacred on a feast day when the nuns from the Convent of the Sacred Heart make their way to St. Louis Cathedral to attend Mass presided over by cardinals, archbishops, and bishops. The narrator describes the interior of the cathedral as follows:

> The sunbeams streamed through the high windows in purple and crimson lights upon a veritable fugue of colour. Within the seats, crush upon crush of spring millinery; within the aisles erect lines of gold-braided, gold-buttoned military. Upon the altar, broad sweeps of golden robes, great dashes of crimson skirts, mitres and gleaming crosses, the soft neutral hue of rich lace vestments . . . . (165)

Charmed by this rainbow of color, Josepha feels herself broken out of her world of "gray things, the neutral skies, the ugly garb, the coarse meats" and into the world of fascinating and colorful others – "for them the rainbow, the ethereal airiness of earthly joys, the bonbons and glacés of the world" (164). The narrative voice is quick to break back in, however, to remind us that Josepha "did not know that the rainbow is elusive, and its colours but the illumination of tears" (164). As in "A Carnival Jangle," we are presented with kaleidoscopic imagery but also its counterpoint – a reminder that within this kaleidoscope world is not only the potential for liberation and change but also the potential for tragedy.

When Josepha plans to escape from the convent – the world that has sheltered her both as an orphan and as a potential prey to implied sexual violence on the part of ill-intentioned would-be adoptive parents – she imagines the streets of the French Quarter as outlets where she might "merge into the great city where recognition was impossible" (168). Significantly, this leap into the world of unrecognizability is still filtered to us as readers through Dunbar-Nelson's careful attention to street names. Chartres Street will be the "way out" into a clearly geographically-

marked world where, counterintuitively, Josepha hopes for liberation from confining structures. Yet the tragedy of the short story, and the tragedy of Josepha's life, comes from her realization that the world's insistence upon categorizing her will leave her vulnerable in a way she is not within the stifling yet nevertheless protective structures of the convent. She knows, in the fervent, final moments of her prayer we see in the story, that she will be unable to answer the unceasing questioning of the world: "Who am I? What am I?" (171). Thus, significantly, "Sister Josepha" – despite references to her "small brown hands" (156) – remains a story that resists the kind of hermeneutic approach that would mark her racially, for we, with her, are asked to exist in the confusion of an indeterminate space and feel the uneasiness and, ultimately, Josepha's despair and resignation at not having answers, at dealing with the emptiness that follows the realization that identity categories cannot adequately account for the irreducible complexities of the self.

The sketch, as a literary genre, lends itself well to this aesthetic of suggestiveness, of indeterminacy, and we find this most masterfully accomplished in Dunbar-Nelson's "The Praline Woman." Here, Tante Marie, the old seller of sugary pecan-flavored treats on Royal Street, offers us line after line of dialogue (or monologue) with only two lines from the narrative voice that position her in geographic space and in liturgical time. The opening sentence places her alongside the Archbishop's chapel; a sentence further into the story pauses at (presumably) noon, signaling to the praline woman to begin her Hail Mary prayer at the traditional hour of the Angelus. Like the other characters in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, Tante Marie fixes herself firmly in space – she notes that upon the illness of her little boy, she lights a votive candle in St. Rocque (177). Yet the sketch also relies upon the disruption of these fixed boundaries in Tante Marie's ultimate musings on whether a heavy rainfall will one day cause the Mississippi River to overtop the levee: "Here come de rain! . . . H'it fall in de Meesseesip, an' fill up – up – so, clean

to de levee, den we have big crivasse, an' po' Tante Marie float away" (179). This disruption of conventional, established, and counted-on boundaries provides an analogue for Dunbar-Nelson's own short story collection itself – a collection at times fixated upon hyper-specificity but at other times open to the playful and dangerous potentialities of indeterminacy and ambiguity.

It is worth noting that Tante Marie – the most clearly racially-marked figure in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* as a black woman (given the longstanding tradition of black praline sellers in the French Quarter) – exists within the sketch from the collection that is most reliant upon aesthetic flux and looseness of form. This apparent paradox is more than simply an odd coincidence; it strikes at the heart of what Dunbar-Nelson achieves with her short stories. This interplay between radical specificity and radical ambiguity is crucial to our understanding of *The Goodness of St. Rocque* as well as of local color literature as a whole. Unless we fully appreciate this, we will find ourselves caught again in the critical tangle that results when we attempt to contextualize the short stories too rigidly within a historical or geographical framework.

Three Critical Routes into the Work of Alice Dunbar-Nelson

In the final section of this chapter, I trace three routes that scholars have taken into the work of Dunbar-Nelson and demonstrate how each of these routes engages with the problem of indeterminacy that I argue exists at the core of these texts. Those routes that I see as most counterproductive are those that shut down this indeterminacy or try to historicize it away. Such approaches lose track of the aesthetic complexities present in these stories, complexities demonstrated by the close readings above. This indeterminacy is not merely a feature of Dunbar-Nelson's stories but also of local color literature. To overemphasize the historical and ethnographic elements of these texts risks downplaying those aspects of local color that rely

upon its roots in romanticism – its indeterminacy, its mysteries, and its provisionality. The reconstruction of a critical genealogy that follows, therefore, does double duty. It is, of course, an overview of and commentary on the approaches scholars have taken to the work of Dunbar-Nelson. Yet we can from these routes extrapolate insights into the methods of interpretation we use in reading other local color literature, noting which methods of inquiry tend to lead to the shutting down of the texts' playfulness and indeterminacy and which lead towards an unintentional but nevertheless detrimental attempt to wave away the mysterious and hermeneutically-resistant elements within the texts. The former methods tend toward an establishment of textual or historical certainties; the latter methods lean toward an appreciation of ambiguous aesthetic elements at work alongside the historical and cultural elements of the text.

Unlike much of the other material covered by this dissertation – material often archival and unevenly attended to by scholars – Alice Dunbar-Nelson's writing has received consistent and sustained critical attention over the past several decades, starting with the recovery work done by Gloria T. Hull. Her three-part biography *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) places Dunbar-Nelson alongside Angelina Grimké Weld and Georgia Douglas Johnson, following her from the young woman who produced *Violets and Other Tales* (1895) and *The Goodness of St. Rocque* (1899) to her role as the respectable, bourgeois *grand dame* receiving deference from a rising generation of Harlem writers. The year following the publication of Hull's critical biography, Oxford University Press in collaboration with the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers released Hull's edited, three-volume compilation of Dunbar-Nelson's works. To date, Hull's three volumes remain the most comprehensive published collection of the author's material. In addition to *Violets* and *The*

Goodness of St. Rocque, these volumes also contain a variety of later poems, unpublished novellas, plays, and a generous sampling of Dunbar-Nelson's journalism and essays. Hull's call for renewed appreciation for Dunbar-Nelson, however, was far from a simple mission of reclamation of a neglected author. Her critical writing about Dunbar-Nelson takes a striking and at times blatantly aggressive tone. *Color, Sex, and Poetry* opens with a poem called "Miss Alice" in which Hull expresses her ambivalence towards that "Stuck up 'risto lady" while nevertheless insisting "if I said we were not sisters / Rain curses, Goddess strike me / for telling one awful lie" (viii). Later critics have taken Hull to task for this tone, but Hull defended her stance in a "personal and literary perspective" essay included in the second edition of *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (2015). There Hull asserts that she is "as ruthlessly unsparing of Dunbar-Nelson as I am of myself" and charts the similarities between their personal lives to illustrate her lived connections to the subject of her research: "both born in Louisiana, lived in Delaware, wrote poetry, engaged in social-political activism" (194). The admission of these biases, Hull argues, should not be problematic so long as she makes her commitments explicit. In a rather contemporary spin on Gadamer's theory of the horizon as a prerequisite for the process of interpretation, Hull asserts in her essay that a cornerstone of her black feminist methodology is that "the proper scholarly stance is engaged rather than 'objective'" (193).

Of Hull's claims, none has had such a critical afterlife as her argument about the division in Dunbar-Nelson's work between "the nonracialness of her belletristic genres and the racialness of her other writings" (*WADN* lvi). The claim appears not only in the introduction to the Oxford editions but is also present in *Color, Sex, and Poetry* and in Hull's other Dunbar-Nelson scholarship. Curiosity over this alleged araciality of her fiction can be traced back to even the

earliest of reader responses to *The Goodness of St. Rocque*. In 1900 the *American Ecclesiastical Review,* a journal for the Catholic clergy, advertised the collection alongside an updated deluxe edition of Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* with the following somewhat unsparing blurb:

> GOODNESS OF SAINT ROCQUE: Alice Dunbar. $1.25. Brief, simple stories of creole sentiment, following good models both in style and method. The author is the wife of the poet of the same name, but the work has no characteristics peculiar to her race, but clearly indicates sufficient skill to handle less hackneyed topics effectively when she may choose to undertake the task. (220)

Though it offers hope for future development of her craft and places Alice in the shadow of Paul – both moves common in early reviews of Dunbar-Nelson's work – this review also reveals that at least some segments of American readership expected works with more direct engagement with racial questions from this woman of color. Almost a century later, this apparent absence of race haunts Gloria Hull. From her perspective, Dunbar-Nelson's conception of fiction as high art relied upon distancing it from the realm of politics and social action. If political critique of racial injustice appears at all in her fiction, Hull claims, it must be coded through a separate set of signifiers than racial ones. Racial differences, then, become sublimated under the category of class difference (*WADN* xxxix). Extending her argument even further into the realm of Freudian analysis, Hull suggests elsewhere that Dunbar-Nelson used "class as a psychological metaphor to replace race in her writings" (*CSP* 55). Though speculative and occasionally too reliant upon a psychoanalytic model of deciphering authorial decisions, Hull's account does display a sensitivity to the ways that Dunbar-Nelson sought to "write about herself – but from deep within limiting psychic and formal structures" (*WADN* xlii). Later critics have overemphasized Hull's remarks on Dunbar-Nelson's paucity of literary skill, and Hull is often unfairly attacked as lacking appreciation for the aesthetic achievements of her subject – quite puzzling attacks given the years Hull invested in restoring Dunbar-Nelson's place in American literature.

Nevertheless, Hull's argument about araciality has had staying power, and in the decades that followed, three distinct reactions to her proposal emerged. These three routes speak not only to the specific interpretive questions raised by Alice Dunbar-Nelson's short stories but also address hermeneutic decisions about how to read local color literature. In short, all three routes seek to answer the following question: What do we talk about when we talk about interpreting local color? These discussions over whether or not Dunbar-Nelson utilized street and neighborhood names to racially code her characters within a decipherable textual map are, at their core, debates over how to read local color literature – how much we should try to reconstruct a body of local knowledge available to the author (and a select section of her original audience) and how much of this reconstruction actually makes a substantive difference in our interpretation of the text under consideration. Dunbar-Nelson's work is particularly suited to such an inquiry insofar as it holds the key tensions of local color literature in uneasy balance – the impulse towards an ethnographic realism and the impulse towards romantic indeterminacy. Roughly, the three routes into interpreting Dunbar-Nelson can be categorized as follows. The first holds that Dunbar-Nelson, with greater or lesser degrees of subversive political intent, coded racial critique into her fiction and that we as critics must draw back the veil of historical and cultural difference to access her latent critique. Such an approach follows logically from the premise of Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse in *Writing Out of Place* that any regionalist writing worth its salt should engage in a critique of oppressive power structures. The second route approaches local color as a form of precise, ethnographic realism and – less concerned with political commitments – conceives of its scholarly project as a primarily historicist one, elucidating linguistic and cultural details for current readers unfamiliar with the historical world of the text. The third route and, I will argue, the one which most convincingly addresses the

hermeneutic questions raised by local color writing, appreciates the indeterminacy of Dunbar-Nelson's fiction as part of the kind of aesthetic experience it offers and accepts this indeterminacy as a feature and not a flaw.

The first of these routes into Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *The Goodness of St. Rocque* exists within a much broader critical tradition of the hermeneutic of suspicion and, as Rita Felski argues in *The Limits of Critique*, an accompanying critical mood or affect of skepticism (3). Under this model, readers assess Dunbar-Nelson's collection with an eye to uncovering what the stories allegedly hide from us and also an eye to uncovering those political gestures acceptable to the critic's own political leanings (while, conversely, criticizing any political expressions within the text that run counter to them). While local color literature certainly can engage with political struggles against oppressive power structures, the main limitation of Fetterley and Pryse's work on Dunbar-Nelson – and their work with local color literature more broadly – is the rigid kind of political framework their model imposes upon its categorizations of regionalist texts. Following the kind of Freudian speculation we find in certain passages of Hull, Fetterley and Pryse imagine Dunbar-Nelson making political statements, as it were, in spite of herself. They claim that, "though she may have viewed regionalist fiction as a space in which she was free to write about subjects other than race and to write about race indirectly, Dunbar-Nelson nevertheless uses regionalist fiction to do the work of racial analysis and to encode her own sympathies" (Fetterley and Pryse 283). This seems, however, to veer too much towards the realm of diagnosis, assuming that the critic possesses the authority or the knowledge to plumb Dunbar-Nelson's own unexpressed psychological impulses. The other danger of relying too heavily on such an approach is its potential to overdetermine interpretations of the text. As Fetterley and Pryse move through their analyses of stories from *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, they as critics appear to

operate under the assumption that the collection's significance lies in its "hidden" promotion of a progressivist politics. The implication that follows is that – without this subversive politics discreetly "hidden" within the work – these stories would be rather bland and sentimentalist fare. Monsieur Fortier of "M'sieu Fortier's Violin" and Baptiste of "Mr. Baptiste" become for Fetterley and Pryse vessels through which Dunbar-Nelson communicates a queer politics in her fiction (334). Tante Marie of "The Praline Woman" and her reference to a "big crivasse" that might flood the city become nods towards a revolutionary politics that will radically disrupt the systems of power that inform the praline seller's world (130). To be clear, politically-tinged interpretations of *The Goodness of St. Rocque* should certainly not be faulted in and of themselves, but a danger exists here of finding these texts redeemable as objects of literary study only insofar as we utilize them as encoded with latent political meaning for us to laud or condemn. Such a move would represent an attempt to limit the imaginative play of these texts and to downplay aesthetic indeterminacy in favor of articulating political certainties.

In "Identities in Crisis: Alice Dunbar-Nelson's New Orleans Fiction," Jordan Stouck offers the claim that *The Goodness of St. Rocque* complicates traditional stock characters (eg. tragic mulattas) by presenting readers with characters who are instead "figurations and exacerbations of identities in crisis" (272). Pushing back against Hull's separation of Dunbar-Nelson's politics from her fiction, Stouck argues that "her activism and her writing can be read co-terminously, in that her writing reveals the injustices that her activism sought to redress politically" (272). Though this claim bears a resemblance to that of Fetterley and Pryse, it relies less on a rhetoric of subversive coding. Rather, it seeks to reconcile the divide between Dunbar-Nelson's fiction and her political activism by using her political writings not to psychoanalyze her but to frame Stouck's interpretation of her stories. Such a method resembles the move made

in Chapter One – reading Gayarré's response to George Washington Cable through the lens of the kinds of conservative politics he espoused in his own literary output – a move that works well enough in Gayarré's particular case but not as well in Dunbar-Nelson's. Yet in spite of Stouck's nuance, we still remain here at the level of trying to impose a unity between Dunbar-Nelson's politics and her writing that may not exist as cleanly as we might wish and may, in fact, flatten out the complex contours of *The Goodness of St. Rocque*.

Kristina Brooks, the most explicit promoter of the idea that Dunbar-Nelson encoded her texts, continues the critical contestation of Hull's observation about araciality in the short stories. In "Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Local Colors of Ethnicity, Class, and Place," Brooks argues that Hull's argument fails to take into account how racial ambiguity does not signal an inherent political quietism in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* but, rather, that the ambiguity arises from readers' own lack of familiarity with the radical particularities of place (4). Brooks puts forward the possibility that "a local audience, privy to the well-known prototypes [that inspired Dunbar-Nelson's work], will experience a racialized reading of the same stories that a non-local audience will find racially unmarked" (8). Yet this kind of reading – that Dunbar-Nelson subtly encodes her stories with racial information that must be recovered or restored via intensive archival research – creates a kind of hermeneutic dilemma, one connected to the complications of a Moretti-style mapping of the text. Namely, this reading of *The Goodness of St. Rocque* appears to set a high cover charge for entry into the text, implying that the collection is a sort of artifact only fully accessible and translatable through the work of the scholar who has the time and resources to decode it. Additionally, such a reading of the short story collection posits the dual-existence of an outsider's text and an (augmented) insider's text – both with potentially contradictory meanings dependent upon how local and non-local readers racialize the characters.

This impulse towards decoding the hidden critiques of Dunbar-Nelson's fiction has its less politically-charged counterpart in the work of historicists such as Robert C. Clark and James Nagel. This approach seems to operate less from a hermeneutic of skepticism but still from a position that holds that readers cannot properly apprehend the text without a full accounting for the local knowledges embedded within it. Clark's "At the Corner of Bourbon and Toulouse Street: The Historical Context of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's 'M'sieu Fortier's Violin'" follows Brooks's assertion that we should not dismiss the numerous street names that mark Dunbar-Nelson's texts but, rather, see these street names as a means of accessing knowledge about the characters, their identity categories, and their motivations. Noting that a richer understanding of "M'sieu Fortier's Violin" comes from a knowledge of the history of the French Opera House, Clark painstakingly reconstructs this history and illuminates what elements in the story draw upon it. On the whole, this is fine historicist work that does not make the kind of missteps one finds in James Nagel's *Race and Culture in New Orleans Stories: Kate Chopin, Grace King, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and George Washington Cable* (2013).

Nagel's book arose out of inquiries on the part of his own students in a Realism and Naturalism course about the frequently opaque racial classification systems present in the Louisiana literature they read for class – particularly their questions regarding the contextual data needed to understand Cable's "Belles Demoiselles Plantation" from *Old Creole Days* (ix). What followed was a project that aims primarily to provide a kind of extended footnoting for Louisiana short story collections from the late-nineteenth century. The execution of such a project, however, demonstrates the limitations of its methodology. Though Nagel goes out of his way to attack Hull for being "historically inaccurate in nearly every conceivable way" (90) and lashes out at a number of other scholars such as Kristina Brooks and Thomas Strychacz, he himself falls

into historical inaccuracy more often than the very scholars for whom he has nothing but negative criticism. For instance, he mistakenly assumes (and is quite clear about this assumption) that every use of the word *Creole* in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* clearly means a Creole of color (94). His interpretations of the short stories also seem to imply that plaçage was still being practiced as late as the 1890s (95). Perhaps most jarring is Nagel's implied logic that because the Bienville Code Noir was not formally removed from the legal codes until the 1860s, it would have been enforced up to that point. Thus his reading of "Little Miss Sophie" makes the bizarre claim that Sophie is a Catholic because "people of color were required, under the *Code Noir*, to be Roman Catholic in Louisiana" (96).[23] Nagel falls into a similar historical error in his interpretation of "The Fisherman of Pass Christian," where he claims that the performance of *La Juive* is significant since "Jews had been excluded from the state under the *Code Noir*, a law changed only after the conclusion of the Civil War" (108). The last example I will offer here of this peculiar and fraught methodology is Nagel's assertion that Camille's name in "Sister Josepha" would have "seemed ironic in the 1890s in the French culture of Louisiana since the most famous novel of the time was Alexandre Dumas's *La Dame aux camellias* of 1848" (113). What methodology could possibly allow Nagel to establish "the most famous novel" of the 1890s for one particular social group in one state remains unstated. It is apparent, then, that Nagel's

[23] Bienville's Code Noir (1724) was imported almost wholesale from the much earlier 1685 Code Noir that governed the French colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti). Its injunctions against Jews and Protestants would have been made effectively obsolete by the transfer of Louisiana to the United States in 1803. Sufficient evidence also exists to prove that even prior to American purchase of the colony, many of the pre-modern regulations of the Code Noir (eg. the requirement that *all* residents of the colony, white and black, must be Catholic) would have been routinely ignored in practice, especially by Spanish colonial authorities eager to attract Protestant merchants and tradesmen to the city (Powell 317). To claim that Code Noir regulations against Protestants and Jews would have been in force as late as the nineteenth century in New Orleans is tantamount to claiming that because sodomy laws remain on the books in American states (even after *Obergefell v. Hodges*), it would be reasonable to believe that sodomy remained an actively-policed offense in the US as late as 2016. For more on the Code Noir, see Lawrence N. Powell's *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Harvard UP, 2012).

interpretation of the collection is flawed, but it would be a mistake to assume that the only flaws are those of historical inaccuracy. The very impulse towards the kind of excessive footnoting of details as a form of interpretation obscures more about Dunbar-Nelson's work than it reveals. I would like to point out the limitations of such footnoting for helping one understand *The Goodness of St. Rocque*. One must take under consideration whether or not the historical and cultural material being footnoted – or, more charitably, as in the case of Clark, elucidated – has a significant enough bearing on one's interpretation that without it we, like Nagel's undergraduate students, would otherwise be lost.

In response to this dilemma, my third grouping of critics offers us a way out. Thomas Strychacz in "'You Could Never Be Mistaken': Reading Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Rhetorical Diversions in *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories*," after giving an extensive overview of the critical discussion on the work thus far, cautions against too quickly letting our impulse to crack the codes within these texts miss a fundamental aspect of Dunbar-Nelson's aesthetics. "One very problematic effect" of such modes of scholarship, argues Strychacz, "is to close down Dunbar-Nelson's rhetorical diversions by orienting readers too swiftly toward one way of decoding and making sense of racial signifiers" (79). With a remarkable attention to technical detail and through a sensitive reading of *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, Strychacz makes a compelling case for remaining open to the irreconcilable or ambiguous spaces within the stories and in doing so remaining open to the playfulness of the narrative voice of Dunbar-Nelson, a narrative voice that continuously subverts our expectations of how to read these texts. Strychacz claims that

> to come to the conclusion that 'Saint Rocque' is a love story keyed by the sweetness of its last sentence, or that 'Carnival' is about masked revel gone awry, means passing over in silence the little tonal oddities, peculiar perspectives, missteps, hesitations, evasions, and

> murderous glances that crowd both stories – and also means ignoring the process by which we manage to do so. (86)

In keeping with the call for metacognition he makes in the passage above, Strychacz argues for a renewed attention to our own scholarly desires to racially mark characters and to be aware of why we desire the kinds of closure we do with texts, even in the realm of academic criticism. In the most compelling passage of his essay, Strychacz offers this hermeneutic approach to Dunbar-Nelson's short stories, suggesting that we appreciate any story of hers as "a riddle that demands to be experienced rather than merely solved" (85). Such a surrender to the aporias of the text seems a strikingly different approach from the methodologies of Freudian psychoanalysis or New Historicism that might (despite their best intentions) impose intellectual structures upon texts that within their own narrative worlds explicitly demonstrate the dangers of absolute trust in such structures as effective mediators of experience.

To exhibit wariness about over-determining one's interpretation of the text does not mean that this epistemological humility requires an abandonment of political or ethical critique. Bill Hardwig's reading of *The Goodness of St. Rocque* in *Upon Provincialism: Southern Literature and National Periodical Culture, 1870-1900* (2013) is not overly-anxious about racially-marking characters but, rather, sees their lack of racial marking as "heightening the realization that there is no clan to claim and protect them" (138). Returning to Hull's appreciation of this araciality, Hardwig holds that if we allow ourselves to exist within the racially-mysterious world of the text, we see more clearly the author's sympathy for marginalized individuals who do not fit into common categories of classification. "Dunbar-Nelson's interest," argues Hardwig in his discussion of "Mr. Baptiste," "consistently gravitates towards the quiet and forgotten victim of the capitalist system – not its points of crisis, such as the riot, but when it runs smoothly. Society does not register human suffering and lost lives, Dunbar-Nelson seems to suggest, except when

their existence is crucial to market-capitalist systems" (134). Here Hardwig's reading makes it clear that one can approach these local color texts with an appreciation for their mysterious elements while nonetheless making substantive points regarding the dignity of the human person and even incorporating a Marxist critique of the structures depicted within the stories without these frameworks overdetermining our overall reading. This delicate negotiation between our own interpretative commitments and a respect for the limitations of our ability to fully account for the ambiguities of Dunbar-Nelson's work avoids critical pressure to view these texts as enigmatic objects whose subversive political meaning must be uncovered while also avoiding an approach that would hold that interpretation of these stories necessitates an encyclopedic accounting for each of their cultural reference points.

* * *

I wish to close this chapter by returning to Strychacz's appreciation for the playfulness of Dunbar-Nelson's *The Goodness of St. Rocque.* Strychacz claims that Dunbar-Nelson "keeps reinventing our experience of the characters' identities through a contrapuntal process of making secure claims and then undoing them" (90). This is true not only for the characters but is an aesthetic decision that informs much of the structure of these stories beyond characterization. Furthermore, we find throughout local color literature similar aesthetic decisions and similar "contrapuntal" processes of making and unmaking claims about regional knowledge. Thus indeterminacy governs not only the stories of *The Goodness of St. Rocque* but often serves as a crucial aesthetic and thematic quality of local color as a literary mode. This indeterminacy relates to setting (mapping), to plot arcs, and to the interpretative suggestions made by the narrative voice. It points us towards the kind of unfathomability Solnit and Snedeker appreciate, that our approach to other human persons as complex beings and to the complex structures of cities and

cultures which consist of relations between these persons must of necessity always be limited and exist in a state of indeterminacy. As the atlas-compilers put it:

> A fathom was an embrace, but you can put your arms around a mystery, and maybe you truly love something only by granting it its full complexity, its unknowability. And maybe love is always an attempt to embrace what cannot be fathomed and to embrace the mystery of it too. (1)

As such, we might fruitfully read Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *The Goodness of St. Rocque* as a study in the aesthetics of unfathomability in local color literature, of our being placed in situations where even our critical desires for definitive knowledge must yield, in a sort of epistemological humility, before an embrace of the limitations of interpretation.

CHAPTER FOUR – [MISREADINGS]
Les mensonges et les menteries: Felix Voorhies's *Acadian Reminiscences* and Evangeline's Empty Tomb

> The Frenchman sipped his wine quietly for a moment, then said with a curious smile, "The truth, Mam'selle, is only this . . . that my land and my people are a myth. You may search for them forever and always you will find this true . . . They are only an illusion, a myth of their own making . . . n'est-ce pas?" So I found the true Cajun after all!
>
> Carolyn Ramsey, conversation with Cajun cultural promoter André Olivier recorded in her *Cajuns on the Bayous* (1957)

> But let's be clear,
> I grew into something that had to do mostly with what people needed of me . . .
> I never planted crops or took them in, never had to cleave
> through thicket and vine to make a way for myself. I was always covered
> by right image & right sound, measured neatly in what others wanted to believe.
>
> Darryl Bourque, "Evangeline Speaks" (2012)

Saint Augustine in *Contra Mendacium* speaks of eight categories of lies. In the *Summa Theologica,* Aquinas narrows this down to three species of lies: officious (useful), mischievous (ill-intentioned), and jocose (amusing). Folklorist Barry Jean Ancelet simplifies the matter even further in the introduction to his book on the oral traditions of the Cajuns and Creoles, distinguishing between two French words for a lie: *un mensonge* and *une menterie* (xxxvi). To tell *un mensonge* means to lie in order to deceive or to obscure the facts of a matter. In telling *une menterie,* on the other hand, one engages in imaginative fabrication for the purpose of delight or entertainment. Arguing about the truth of literature always presents a dicey task, especially given that fiction itself falls under a particular category of lies. Disputes over literary truth claims have been lesser concerns in the previous two chapters – Hearn's withheld translations and Dunbar-Nelson's ambiguities prod us to confront the limits of literary interpretation rather than a conflict over competing versions of history. However, in this final chapter, we come to a repetition with a difference. The first chapter of this project attended to Cable's and Gayarré's sparring in urban Creole New Orleans about the boundary lines between historical romance and historical fact. This final chapter approaches a similar interpretive

dilemma that arose in rural Cajun Louisiana, in those coastal parishes lying to the west of New Orleans where the descendants of French Canadian exiles settled in the mid-eighteenth century. After local colorist Felix Voorhies published *Acadian Reminiscences, with the True Story of Evangeline* (1907), local, national, and international readers took his Cajun reappropriation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Evangeline* (1847) not as an imaginative literary treatment of the historical realities of the Acadian diaspora but as actual, verifiable history. When Voorhies and Cajun intellectual, cultural, and business elites doubled-down on this misinterpretation and insisted – despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary – that the heroine Emmeline Labiche existed as a flesh-and-blood, historical person buried in an actual grave near St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church and that the novella was not a novella at all but a work of non-fiction, the disputes that followed demonstrated a failure to reckon with the boundary between historical fact and historical romance, a failure to distinguish between those falsehoods that fall under the category of *mensonges* and those that constitute the *menteries* of fiction.

This refusal to differentiate between *mensonges et menteries* resonates with this dissertation's focus on the tensions between ethnographic and romantic elements of local color literature. What Voorhies and his supporters proposed in asserting the historical factuality of the character Emmeline Labiche went beyond mere imaginative playfulness or an assertion of the romantic truths that fiction could depict. Instead, it confounded the distinction between historical verifiability and collective emotional resonance. In doing so, Voorhies and company engaged in an act of misreading, a term used here in a very specific sense and not simply to mean a dispute over a point of interpretation (she claims element X of a text means Y; he claims it means Z). Misreading as I mean it in this chapter refers to a fundamental miscategorization of the genre of a given text and a failure on the part of readers to distinguish between the distinct kinds of truth

claims put forward by history and those put forward by fiction. The ability to differentiate these claims is crucial for the reading of local color insofar as the genre itself operates in a hybrid space between versions of truth grounded in varying epistemologies. The interpretive conflict explored in this chapter, over Emmeline Labiche and her burial space, hinges upon the inability of its participants to fully articulate which kinds of truth claims were under discussion. Voorhies and the readers who followed his interpretive lead in promoting *Acadian Reminiscences* as a work of non-fiction pretended that all truth claims existed within the same epistemological framework. Not only did this elide the crucial tension in local color literature between romance and realism – it also elided an appreciation for epistemological distinctions about human claims to knowledge.

It is not that I cannot imagine an argument for viewing the confusion over Voorhies's novella in a positive light. Clearly we can sketch out a variety of academic claims about the Cajun community's reception of the text that would seem more generous: (a) the novella, accepted as historical fact, becomes part of a community's collective origin myth, and scholars should shy away from criticizing ethnic communities' desires to create their own narrative histories; (b) the novella highlights the instability of genre categories, and its mixing of historical fiction with historical fact leads its readers into hybrid spaces at the intersection of myth and history; (c) from a Marxist standpoint, the Cajun population cannily seizes upon the economic possibilities Voorhies's claims open up for tourism and reappropriates the Anglo-Protestant Longfellow's Evangeline as part of a Franco-Catholic cultural and economic restoration initiative. Yet all of these possibilities, on a fundamental level, fail to satisfy my own hermeneutic frustrations with the reception history of Voorhies's novella. There is a certain hesitancy, of course, to argue that a group is engaged in a misreading of a text – particularly if

that group constitutes a minority ethnic population. However, I hold that to shelve the hermeneutic problems the reception of Voorhies's text raises risks treating the distinction between valid and invalid interpretations of texts as either a matter of little consequence or as a utilitarian question (i.e. "How is this interpretation *useful*, regardless of its validity on a hermeneutic level?"). A relativistic approach to truth here appears disconnected from lived experience and unnecessarily pedantic when the question at hand is not an abstraction but whether or not a particular human being was among a group of political exiles and whether or not her actual body is entombed in a specific, singular location. Temptations towards post-structuralist thinking in this and similar cases fail to take into account significant claims to truth (i.e. a corpse of an actual Acadian exile is buried in this grave) and merely approach these truth claims as functions of particular power structures or identitarian allegiances. In doing so, such interpretations ignore the distinction between *mensonge* and *menterie*, between the falsehoods that obscure the truth and those fabrications (accepted as pretense on a certain level) that delight in their imaginative playfulness. While I am not the first to "break the case" of Evangeline's empty tomb and find myself deeply indebted to the foundational work of Carl A. Brasseaux in this matter, I do demonstrate in this chapter that a literary approach to the controversy over Felix Voorhies's *Acadian Reminiscences* illuminates how a conflict over historical facts can also be fruitfully framed as a conflict over literary interpretation that emerged from an inability to consider literary genre and a failure to identify the conventions of literary romanticism.

Literary Graves and Tales of Truth

We will return to the putative grave of the "real" Evangeline momentarily, but first – a detour from the margins to the center, from the cemeteries of Cajun country to a graveyard near

the very tip of Manhattan. In the years following the publication of Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple, A Tale of Truth* (1791) – one of the earliest American novels – visitors to Trinity Churchyard in New York City paid homage to the fictional Charlotte at her alleged gravesite, where a memorial stone bearing her name had been laid. Despite scholarly arguments based on historical data and on the status of *Charlotte Temple* as a work of fiction, readers insisted on treating Charlotte as an actual human being and thus treating her gravestone as a true marker of her body's resting place. Cathy N. Davidson sums up the situation as follows in her introduction to the novel:

> "A Tale of Truth" was what Rowson promised, and it was as a tale of truth that her novel was long read. No matter that the critics (for what do critics know?) maintained Charlotte Temple, both text and character, to be mere fiction. There was, in fact, a small industry that flourished in the nineteenth century that labored to flesh out the details of the purported affair between John Montresor, a wealthy cousin of the author's, and Charlotte Stanley, the granddaughter of an English earl. (xiv)

Some of this, of course, may be treated as readers' imaginative expressions of emotional identification with a fictional character. Visitors to King's Cross Station in London who seek out Platform 9 ¾ know very well that J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter is a fictional character and that no steam engine awaits on the other side of the wall to take them to Hogwarts. Yet the visitation represents a tangible expression of one's affective connection to the fictional world of the literary text. A similar phenomenon, to be sure, is at play for those who visited Charlotte Temple's grave. What makes the case of Voorhies's novella different, however, is that its reception history demonstrates a readership less interested in engaging in sympathetic identification with the fictional Emmeline Labiche and more interested in establishing a self-conscious Cajun heritage for south Louisiana based upon a claim for the historical reality of a questionable culture-heroine whose personality and actions valorize ethno-isolationism and cultural stasis.

Given the submerged geography of coastal south Louisiana, it is not surprising that the Cajuns have historically tended to bury their dead above ground as a practical necessity. Local apocrypha holds that the corpses early settlers misguidedly buried below the earth resurfaced during hurricane storm surges. For a Catholic population who devoutly recited *et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum* as part of the Nicene Creed at Mass, this grisly resurgence of decidedly un-glorified bodies must have been sufficiently disturbing to merit inclusion in regional folklore. Writers of history and romance have repeatedly noted how the white-washed sepulchres in south Louisiana cemeteries serve as vivid reminders that the dead cannot be conveniently ignored or placed discreetly out of sight, that they endure as both material and spiritual presences in the lives of those who survive them. So, though the phrasing of "burying" someone above ground rather than interring them may seem a contradiction in terms, we must remember the Old English origins of *bury* in *byrgan* (to protect, to shelter), a word etymologically linked as well to the modern German *burg* (fortress, castle). The grave functions, then, both as the repository for the protection of the individual corpse from the elements and as a space that preserves and keeps present the memory of the dead for the collective memory of a living community.

One grave that serves as just such a repository of collective cultural memory for Cajuns can be found beside St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church in St. Martinville, Louisiana. White-washed and shaped like the graves in the more contemporary cemetery across the Bayou Teche from the church, one tomb bears a marble plate with the inscription, in French, "Evangeline / Emmeline Labiche / Old Cemetery of St. Martin / In remembrance of the Acadian exiles of 1765" (see Fig. 4.1 and Fig. 4.2). Atop the grave is a statue of Evangeline, modeled after and donated by Dolores Del Rio, the actress who had played the title role in the 1929 silent film

Fig. 4.1: The purported grave of Emmeline Labiche beside St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

Fig. 4.2: "Evangeline girls" wearing historically-inaccurate Norman bonnets surround the inscription on the grave: "Evangeline / Emmeline Labiche / Vieux Cimitière de St. Martin / Mémoire des Acadiens exilés de 1765" (Source: Getty Images).

version of Longfellow's 1847 poem *Evangeline*. Local lore and, up until the past few decades, even local scholars and academics, supported that this grave represented the resting place of a real woman upon whom Longfellow had based his poem, a young Acadian deportee from present-day Nova Scotia named Emmeline Labiche. These claims based their accuracy upon a text by amateur author and local judge Felix Voorhies that had appeared first as a serial in the New Iberia, Louisiana, newspaper *The Weekly Iberian* under the title "Evangeline's True History: Or, Reminiscences of Old Acadia " before being published in book form in 1907 by publishing houses in both Boston and New Orleans as *Acadian Reminiscences, with the True Story of Evangeline*.

The text utilizes a frame narrative in which Voorhies's Grandmother Borda recounts her adoption of the orphaned Emmeline Labiche (nicknamed Evangeline) and their trials in the wake of the deportation of the French Acadians from Acadie (present-day Nova Scotia) by British forces. A number of details, most crucially the relocation of Evangeline's grave from Philadelphia to the churchyard of St. Martin de Tours, diverge from Longfellow's poem. From a literary perspective, Voorhies's *Acadian Reminiscences* represents a local color fiction complete with the usual tropes – the emphasis on anxieties about the cultural decay of a local ethnic group in the face of modernity and the use of an older, female figure to represent a living source of communal memory and local knowledge. Yet, curiously, proof exists that a substantial number of initial readers, even readers and scholars from the Cajun region of south Louisiana, received Voorhies's text as non-fiction (albeit imaginative non-fiction) rather than as a fictional novella. This mislabeling of fiction as non-fiction by readers would be rather unremarkable had Voorhies, who had previously written short stories and dramas, not so vehemently doubled-down on claiming the inherent, verifiable truth of his text when questioned about the reality of its

characters. It seemed that the more outside scholars (and at one point even cultural organizations from Canada) began to question the factual status of Voorhies's claims, the more Voorhies and the surrounding Cajun cultural apparati of the early-twentieth century defended their claims that Emmeline Labiche (herself a fictional character) was the true basis for Longfellow's *Evangeline* and that her actual body was interred either in the grave near St. Martin de Tours or somewhere in the yard abutting the church building.

The debate about the factual details surrounding Voorhies's novella presents particular challenges to scholars of American literary regionalism. If locals, the repositories of the very lore local color claims to utilize for its literary purposes, argue that *Acadian Reminiscences* should be read as non-fiction, this poses a dilemma for scholars hoping to use local knowledge as a lens for reading local color literature. Recently Stephanie Foote has argued in "Local Knowledge and Women's Regional Writing" that scholarly work in American literature could benefit from the "revaluation" of local knowledge as an aspect of regional writing and suggests as a scholarly practice "claiming the local and the local's particular epistemology" (296). Foote goes on to claim that we should attend to "what Emily Satterwhite has called 'reception geography,' which takes seriously the social meaning of the regional popularity of different kinds of texts" (307). This approach is no doubt valuable; local color can hardly be analyzed faithfully if one does not take into account the actual *loci* depicted within the texts. Yet, what should we do when the locals mistake non-fiction for fiction and the local author of a text, along with the academic and scholarly institutional structures of his community, support this misreading? One potential outcome would be to assert that the Cajun population, in self-determining fashion, should have the power to construct their own historical narratives and utilize them for cultural and economic gain. Under this framework, the assertions that St. Martinville could boast of being the burial site

of an actual Evangeline can be read as a new stage in Cajun development of origin stories and cultural mythos or as a canny manipulation of the center by the margins to profit from a burgeoning tourism industry that took visitors west of New Orleans into the Cajun parishes of the state. The underlying premise of this assertion places a value on the ability of locals to utilize specific readings of texts for their own benefit (cultural, communal, economic) regardless of the interpretative validity of those readings. Such a framework, while it appears to give agency to the ethnic Others to tell their own stories without critique from the outside, fails to take into account a hermeneutic question – namely, it treats interpretive truth as contingent upon the use-value of those interpretations and shelves any discussion of valid or invalid interpretations of texts. Such a focus feels misguided, for while it appears to value the lived experiences and the epistemologies of locals, it gives short shrift to any sustained discussion of literary hermeneutics and indefinitely brackets arguments about the distinction between empirically-verifiable truths and the truth claims of fictional texts.

Interpretive dilemmas that stemmed from local color's simultaneous ethnographic and historical impulses did not always confuse fictional and historical elements in the texts under dispute. For example, Cable encoded historically accurate local information into *The Grandissimes*, but no reader made the argument that Frowenfeld was an actual apothecary who lived in the French Quarter in the years following the Louisiana Purchase. With the interpretive conflict surrounding *Acadian Reminiscences*, we come upon a much more radical conflation between the novel and the history book. The tension here is less about literary realism versus literary romanticism and more about two competing claims for what *Acadian Reminiscences* is as a text. The author and a sizable portion of his readership claimed that the events and characters in the text are empirically, verifiably real. Readers and critics from other quarters,

while they acknowledged that there may be other forms of literary truth present in the text (eg. truths about Cajun cultural anxieties at the turn of the century), refused to accept the claims that such truths were the same as the facts of history. Here, if I must brave a provisional answer to Pontius Pilate's daunting question (*Quod est veritas?*), it would be that we must be careful to avoid falling into the very logical fallacy of equivocation that led Voorhies and some of his readers to conflate two usages of truth – truth as verifiable fact and truth as a form of aesthetic resonance.

I will begin this discussion by tracing the development of the Evangeline narrative from the historical reality of *le grand dérangement* of the Acadians from Acadie through the composition of Longfellow's poem to Felix Voorhies's Cajun re-appropriation of the legend. In doing so, I will indicate that these tensions between historical data and romance did not arise with Voorhies but existed more widely throughout non-fictional, poetic, and fictional texts related to the Acadian diaspora. The second section will analyze the creation of the Evangeline monument in St. Martinville and argue that the tomb is, despite previous contention by touristic, academic, and cultural institutions, in fact empty. The closing section will make a final argument for the significance of these disputes over the interpretations of local color literature and how these disputes arise from its position between the at times incompatible literary-epistemological modes of realism and romance, of empiricism and mystery. It will offer as well a proposal for how to balance our interpretation of local color literature between our desires to remain open to the imaginative possibilities of these texts while simultaneously taking seriously the ways these texts propose to depict, with some level of accuracy, actual local knowledges, traditions, and practices.

Evangeline From 1755 to 1907: Histories and Fictions

In what follows, I will sketch out a brief history of the Acadian diaspora in a manner that highlights how writers and historians dating back to the eighteenth century blended romantic truth with historical fact in their accounts of the *dérangement*. In doing so, I demonstrate how Longfellow and Voorhies, far from adopting an approach that blurred the line between the pastoral and the historical, actually pulled from an extensive tradition of writing about Acadian history as an archetypical tale of "paradise lost." If later hermeneutic trouble arose between those who read *Acadian Reminiscences* as historical fact and those who identified it as historical fiction, the uneasy intermingling of Acadian realities with Acadian romance predated the novella by centuries. The historical facts of the expulsions, unembellished by the trappings of romanticized narrative, can be summarized briefly. The British military acquisition in 1710 of Acadie, the peninsula on the eastern coast of Canada now known as Nova Scotia, began a long period of tension between the Catholic, Francophone inhabitants of the region and the new colonial administration (Hodson 33). These tensions persisted for nearly the first half-century of British rule, often boiling over into armed clashes between British forces and French Acadian militias aided by their Mikmaq Indian allies (Hodson 40). (Afterwards, eighteenth-century French histories and twentieth-century Cajun accounts, both oral and written, would downplay these skirmishes in favor of presenting the Acadians as peaceful farmers and craftsmen who had been maliciously deported by the British.) By 1755, these conflicts precipitated the British decision to begin a decade-long campaign of systematic removal of the Acadians from Acadie.

The village of Grand Pré, among the earliest of these expulsion sites, would go on to occupy a place of prominence in Cajun historical consciousness due to the particular pathos of the circumstances of the deportation there. This pathos would also attract Longfellow, who chose

Grand Pré as the setting for his narrative poem *Evangeline.* It was in this village that British officials and soldiers gathered all adult Acadian men into the local church. Once locked inside, a British officer read aloud to the assembly the official proclamation of their deportation. After imprisoning these Acadian men for several days, the British loaded them along with their families and their moveable property (save livestock) onto ships moored in the Bay of Fundy (Hodson 45). In the confusion of boarding the boats, family members and friends became separated from one another. Cajun oral and written accounts of the deportation often seize upon this detail and claim, perhaps with some exaggeration, that British soldiers intentionally and viciously divided wives from husbands and children from parents to load them onto different ships, though Christopher Hodson's recent history *The Acadian Diaspora* (2012) suggests a more nuanced and realistic approach to this separation, blaming it on a combination of "malice, carelessness, and the complexity of a massive operation" (49). To prevent Acadians from returning to resettle the village, the British burned Grand Pré to the ground.

With minor variations, British forces continued this pattern of expulsion in other French settlements throughout the peninsula. Once at sea, the British ships scattered the majority of these exiles along the North American seaboard from Massachusetts down as far south as Savannah, Georgia (Hodson 51). Other Acadians found themselves placed on ships traveling back eastward across the Atlantic to France itself (Hodson 85). Of these Acadians deported to France, some would later petition the French government to settle in the colony of Louisiana, where their compatriots, cast along the English colonies on the Atlantic seaboard, had been slowly making their way and resettling (Hodson 184). Spanish Louisiana seemed an ideal space for the now-homeless Acadian population. A former French colony, its white population remained overwhelmingly Francophone and Roman Catholic. In the swamps and prairies to the

west of New Orleans, these Acadians, whose dialect would later shift *Acadien* to *Acajan* to *Cajun*, consolidated their identity as a distinct ethnic group and continued to maintain their linguistic, religious, musical, and culinary traditions well into the following centuries.[24]

While these Acadian settlers spent the early years of the nineteenth century developing their new communities along the Louisiana Gulf Coast, a New England professor of modern languages later to be numbered among the Schoolroom Poets was at work in the Harvard Library reading the history of *le grand dérangement* from the limited sources at his disposal. The professor, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, had first become interested in the history of the Acadians' exile during an 1844 dinner with Nathaniel Hawthorne and the minister H.L. Conolly (Hawthorne 460). Conolly had, years earlier, recounted an Acadian tale to Hawthorne, who recorded the germ of what would become *Evangeline* in his notebook in late 1838:

> H.L. C—— heard from a French Canadian the story of a young couple in Acadie. On their marriage day all the men of the Province were summoned to assemble in the church to hear a proclamation. When assembled, they were all seized and shipped off to be distributed through New England, — among them the new bridegroom. His bride set off in search of him, — wandered about New England all her lifetime, and at last when she was old, she found her bridegroom on his deathbed. The shock was so great that it killed her likewise. (250)

At the meal in 1844, Conolly repeated the tale for Longfellow, who seized upon it with far more interest than had Hawthorne. When Hawthorne later assured Longfellow that he had given up on the idea of turning the tale into a short story, Longfellow launched into researching Acadian history and geography (Brasseaux 11).

The sources available at Harvard that Longfellow read to fill the gaps in his own

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[24] Archival records indicate that even those Acadians who had been deported back to France retained a sense of their identity as a distinct nation. While negotiating their resettlement with representatives from the court of King Louis XVI, one Acadian used the phrase "heads of the nation" to describe Acadian leaders. To this, the French colonial administrator Antoine-Philippe Lemoyne responded furiously that he would address the Acadians "only as French, as subjects of the king committed to obey him . . ., not as a foreign nation" (qtd. in Hodson 185).

knowledge of Acadian history laid the foundation for Longfellow's own pastoral depiction of Grand Pré. The blending of historical data with romantic embellishment in these texts – even self-conscious embellishment and admissions (with whiffs of Gayarré) that these historical works pull from poetry as well as history – represents an early example of tensions that would later arise in local color literature between the aesthetic goals of literary romanticism and literary realism. Of chief importance to Longfellow's historical study was Thomas C. Haliburton's *An Historical and Statistical Account of Nova Scotia*, which portrayed the Acadians as idyllic farmers, timeless peasants shocked into history through their experience of the deportation, resembling residents of classical Arcadia more than the eighteenth-century French colony of Acadia. Haliburton marvels at the Acadians' ability to survive without paper currency or frequent recourse to civil institutions. Agricultural abundance and social harmony constitute the hallmarks of their society. Even Haliburton concedes at one point that we seem to be in the realm of Romantic poetry rather than history, noting that his readers might think his material "worthy rather of the poet than the historian" (172). Yet, he immediately offers the defense that his depiction of the Acadian world comes "much nearer the truth than is generally imagined" (172). Haliburton makes clear that the main source of his information comes from the work of one "Reynal," though in point of fact Haliburton's description of the Acadians is less an adaptation of his source material than a direct translation of parts of Abbé Guillaume Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1770). Raynal's text similarly posits a pastoralism that flattens out the Acadian population into a noble, pious peasantry and that glosses over the frontier lifestyle of the Acadians as well as their skirmishes with British forces. As such, Raynal stands at the origins of a tradition that would progress from Haliburton to Longfellow to Felix Voorhies – the romanticization of an Acadian

past and the depiction of Acadie as a prelapsarian space detached from the conflicts and complications of history. From such descriptions, it is not a far leap to Longfellow's "forest primeval" where *Evangeline* famously opens.

Though later variations on the *Evangeline* theme would place emphasis on Louisiana as the primary *locus* in which the heroine lives and moves, Longfellow's poem puts its title character on a trajectory that ranges across the North American continent. After her separation from her fiancé Gabriel Lajeunesse and her deportation from Grand Pré, Evangeline Bellefontaine partners with her village priest Father Felician to recover her lost Gabriel, and the two travel southward on the Ohio River before reaching the Mississippi. Turned away from St. Martinville, Louisiana, by Gabriel's father, who gives them news his son has left the region, Evangeline continues on a journey that takes her through American Indian villages in the Ozark Mountains, up to Michigan, and finally to Philadelphia, where she takes her vows as a Sister of Mercy. It is there, as an older woman, that she miraculously finds her fiancé among the victims of a fever outbreak, and the couple share a reunion kiss before Gabriel succumbs to his fatal illness. Longfellow, keen on creating a North American panorama, describes at length the varied geographical features of the regions Evangeline travels through. Here his source for the look of the wilderness – and for the route Evangeline and Felician take to Louisiana – was Timothy Flint's *Recollections of the Last Ten Years Passed in the Valley of the Mississippi* (Brasseaux 12). Flint, also famous for a popular biography of Daniel Boone, offered Longfellow particular insight into the landscape of the Ozarks.

Carl A. Brasseaux notes in his short monograph *In Search of Evangeline: Birth and Evolution of the Evangeline Myth* (1988) that "Emulating the bards of old, Longfellow was self-consciously creating a usable past for Americans" (13). Critics have long acknowledged

Longfellow's creative goals included the creation of an American mythology, but it is initially difficult to see where *Evangeline* fits into this mythos. From the perspective of most antebellum Anglo-Americans, Evangeline herself would have been fundamentally un-American: a fervent Catholic, a French-speaker, and a foreigner who (during the French and Indian Wars taking place during the poem) would have been looked upon with some suspicion by colonists in New England. Andrew C. Higgin's "Evangeline's Mission: Anti-Catholicism, Nativism, and Unitarianism in Longfellow's *Evangeline*" makes a compelling case for how the poem pushes back against such nativism and proposes instead a "devoutly Unitarian" perspective on America, a nation that exists as a "Christian multi-culture" (549). Yet the poem's popularity among nineteenth-century Americans likely stemmed not so much from the religious or linguistic background of its heroine but from its sentimental plot of separated lovers and the way the faithful Evangeline's journey allows Longfellow to word-paint panoramic views of the American landscape. In traversing the continent (from the rocky seashores of the Canadian Maritimes to the marshes of the Gulf South to the forest settlements of the upper Midwest), Evangeline provides readers with a travelogue of North America that highlights the diversity of the continent's natural environment. Thus, to expand upon Higgin's claim, Longfellow is not only imagining a theological multi-culture within the United States but also depicting the very geography of the nation as multi-faceted and diverse. Here we have the genres of travelogue and romance operating alongside each other, another blending that anticipates the similar aesthetic work of postbellum local color.

Though her geographic range is expansive, the most famous images of Longfellow's Evangeline Bellefontaine place her not in the Ozarks, listening to an Indian woman's tale of lost love, nor do they place her in the "depths of the Michigan forests" (Longfellow 109). Instead,

most of the popular representations of Evangeline frame her in Spanish moss in a space depicted in similarly Edenic terms as the early historians had depicted Acadia:

> . . . not far away to the southward
> On the banks of the Teche, are the towns of St. Maur and St. Martin.
> There the long-wandering bride shall be given again to her bridegroom.
> There the long-absent pastor regain his flock and his sheepfold.
> Beautiful is the land, with its prairies and forests of fruit-trees . . . .
> Those who dwell there have named it the Eden of Louisiana! (Longfellow 93)

If Acadie had been depicted in Raynal and Haliburton's histories as a prelapsarian space of bounty and plenty, we find Longfellow's treatment of Louisiana following in a similar vein. Geographic descriptions of the landscape ("prairies and forests and fruit trees") receive romantic value – not only is the land *like* this; the land being like this *signifies* something, in this case abundance and reconciliation. Yet the residents of this space, the Cajuns themselves – who in the nineteenth century remained on the whole illiterate and unschooled in the English language – remained generally unaware of Evangeline for the decades following the publication of Longfellow's poem.[25] During Reconstruction, however, the rapid development of infrastructure through the South – particularly the railroad system – further opened Cajun communities to a broader national public and national Anglophone culture. A small group of wealthy Cajun elites began to gain access to public schooling in the English language and also began to produce modest literary production in English (such as the prose fiction and dramas of Felix Voorhies). Yet most Cajuns remained either without access to public education or reluctant to send their children to schools where they received corporal punishment for speaking French rather than English (Berard xx). Shane K. Berard points out in *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (2003) that these barriers that existed between Cajuns and Anglo-American culture lasted well

[25] Descendants of non-deported Acadians, still living in Canada in the mid-nineteenth century, were able to read Longfellow's *Evangeline* in their own language. The Quebeçois author Pamphile Le May published North America's first French translation of the poem in 1865. This translation was taught in New Brunswick classrooms almost immediately following its publication (Griffiths 36).

beyond the late-nineteenth century: "most Cajuns remained culturally isolated from the rest of America for nearly the entire first half of the twentieth century, even as radio made its way into south Louisiana during the 1920s and 1930s" (xx).

For the late-nineteenth century, though, literary representations of Cajuns came from primarily non-Cajun sources. George Washington Cable's mid-career romance *Bonaventure* (1888), though often passed over by current critics, depicts crucial conflicts in postbellum Cajun communities between tradition and modernity, between family loyalties and individual ambitions. Though Cable's *Bonaventure* does not depict Cajuns in a particularly negative light, other authors were not as generous. The white Creole author Sidonie de la Houssaye, encouraged by Cable to make use of Cajuns as subjects in her own local color writing (composed in French), published the novel *Pouponne et Balthazar* the same year that *Bonaventure* appeared in book form (Hebert-Letier 45). De la Houssaye's novel retells the Evangeline legend but does so in a manner that perpetuated New Orleans Creoles' stereotypes of themselves as "European" French, urban cosmopolites compared to their ignorant, violent, and drunken Cajun cousins to the west. The title characters, two Acadians separated from one another during the deportation, reunite in Louisiana and are taken under the wing of benevolent Creole landowners. During her wedding celebrations, Pouponne refuses to dance with her Cajun friends and relatives as she slowly begins to imitate her wealthy Creole patrons. One member of a group of intoxicated, bitter Cajuns watching her dance remarks, "Et alors comme ça c'tte belle Pouponne qu'aime tant à tourner l'nez susse l'pauvre monde, qu'est fiare [*sic*] comme un soleil . . . qui s'scroit trop pour danser avec nos autres"[26] (204). Though we might take this remark to be simply the envious criticism of a minor character, the text itself goes on to implicitly praise Pouponne's decision to

[26] "Well then, just like that, this beautiful Pouponne, who loves so much to turn her nose up at the world of poverty, who is as proud as a sunflower . . . who considers it too much to dance with us."

adopt the refined manners of the Creoles; she and her husband become overseers of the Creole plantation, enjoying a happy ending while their relatives continue to live in ignorance and poverty. Thus we have an Evangeline-figure in Pouponne who proves faithful to her lost-and-found-again husband but who proves unfaithful to her family and her heritage in her pursuit of improved socioeconomic status – the latter being a common element of local color literature's narrative arc (eg. Hamlin Garland's "Up the Coulee"). Juxtaposed against Pouponne's fate is that of another Cajun woman, Tit'Mine, who remained in her ethnic community, mired in poverty and ignorance. Her former admirer, the educated Creole Placide Bossier, looks upon her with disgust as he encounters her in the final pages of the novel: "Le jeune homme la regardait, et il se demandait, en la voyant à demi déshabilée devant lui, en l'écoutant parler, comment il avait pu aimer une créature aussi vulgaire"[27] (213-14).

Though lauded during her lifetime by the French Creole literary establishment that continued to survive in New Orleans well into the later decades of the nineteenth century, de la Houssaye's work infuriated members of the educated Cajun population who bristled at the stark dichotomy she drew between uncouth Cajuns and cultivated Creoles. Among those Cajuns who took offense was none other than the St. Martinville judge Felix Voorhies, who decided the best riposte to de la Houssaye's defamation of Cajun character would be a novel of his own (Brasseaux 16). Like *Pouponne et Balthazar*, Voorhies's novella relies upon the framing device of a grandmother recounting a variation on the Evangeline narrative to her grandchildren. Unlike *Pouponne et Balthazar*, Voorhies's *Acadian Reminiscences, with the True Story of Evangeline*, was written and published in English, initially in serial form in 1895 issues of the New Iberia newspaper *The Weekly Iberian* and later in a 1907 book edition.

[27] The young man looked at her, and he wondered to himself, seeing her half-undressed before him and listening to her talk, how he could have loved such a vulgar creature.

Voorhies's retelling of the Evangeline legend opens with the first-person narrator's extensive reflections on the nature of memory and the strength of youthful recollections. We will receive other "Acadian reminiscences" later, as Grandmother Borda gathers her grandchildren around her to pass along her own experiences in *le grand dérangement*, but the initial reminiscences of the novella are those of the narrator's pastoral childhood in Louisiana – pastures of cattle, meandering bayous. He marvels,

> How strange that I should recall so vividly those things, while scenes that I have admired in my maturer years have been obliterated from my memory! Ah! the child's mind, like soft wax, is easily molded to sensations and impressions that never fade, while man's mind, blunted by the keenness of life's deceptions, can no longer receive and retain the imprints of those impressions and sensations. (17)

The declaration serves a double purpose. It reinforces the validity of the childhood recollections of the now-adult narrator and also, pre-emptively, buttresses the validity of the tale Grandmother Borda is about to tell about her own childhood in Acadie. In case the reader has lingering doubts about the accuracy of these reminiscences, the narrator praises Grandmother Borda for her "clear and lucid memory" that "contained a wealthy mine of historical facts that an antiquarian or chronicler would have been proud to possess" (18). Thus, like many local color frame narratives, *Acadian Reminiscences* begins with an insistence upon its own veracity and the authority of its storyteller, Grandmother Borda.

As we move from the prologue to the "true story" of Evangeline herself, certain stylistic infelicities creep into Voorhies's text. The grandmother speaks in a stilted, legalistic syntax – unsurprising for a character created by a judge. She explains the layout of the Acadian village of her girlhood in the following terms: "The province was divided into districts inhabited by a certain number of families, among which the government parceled out the land in tracts sufficiently large for their needs" (27). Her Acadian village of St. Gabriel (which has no

similarly-named parallel in the historical record) operates much in the style of the imagined Acadia of Raynal, Haliburton, and Longfellow. Here an industrious peasantry, loyal to the Catholic Church and to their King, labored on fertile farmland. Farmers kept their cattle pastured together on the same commons. Young couples married for love without familial conflict or concerns about economic disparities between bride and groom. Then the grandmother's tone shifts from legalistic to pastoral to unreservedly didactic as she informs her grandchildren (the narrator among them) the reason she tells them this story:

> Alas! that this simplicity of our Acadian manners should have already degenerated into extravagance and folly! Ah, the Acadians are losing, by degrees, the remembrance of the traditions and customs of the mother country; the love of gold has implanted itself in their hearts, and this will bring no happiness to them. (31)

In the grandmother's jeremiad, Voorhies encodes a message for another audience – those Cajuns with enough education to read in English, a readership who by their very ability to read the text are complicit in the Americanization of the region and fall under Voorhies's condemnation for accepting this Americanization as a means of accessing economic prosperity. The decline in the use of the French language, the ignorance of traditional folkways, and the general assimilation into Anglo-American culture threaten both the children of *Acadian Reminiscences* and the text's assimilating Cajun readers. Insofar as the children are concerned, they reach the end of the narrative having fully assimilated their matriarch's message. As they crowd around her in the final passage of the novella, they assure her: "We are proud now of being called Acadians, for there never was any people more noble, more devoted to duty, and more patriotic than the Acadians who became exiles, and who braved death itself, rather than renounce their faith, their king and their country" (107).

After her didactic preface, Grandmother Borda segues into an account of the actual deportation of the French frontier population from Acadie. Here Voorhies deviates from both the

historical record and from Longfellow's *Evangeline*, substituting a new brand of Cajun Catholic romanticism in the place of the romanticism found in Longfellow's poem. The Acadian leader Rene LeBlanc insists that the villagers have taken no part in treasonous activities or militia raids against British forces, arguing with mawkish fervor that their "only crime is their love for France and their devotion to the Catholic faith" (73). In LeBlanc's plea we hear echoes of Raynal and Haliburton, for whom the Acadians' vaunted piety and devotion to their monarch mark them as innocent victims shocked out of the pastoral mode into history. Other instances of Voorhies's modification of the historical record include his treatment of the circumstances under which deportation from Acadie took place. Contrary to historical accounts and in contrast with Longfellow's *Evangeline*, the Acadians in Voorhies's novella set fire to their own villages and slaughter their own livestock before the British reach the village of St. Gabriel. They also, significantly, decide to resettle in Louisiana before they have even been loaded onto the ships. One village elder explains, "We leave friendless and penniless for distant lands; we leave for Louisiana, where we shall be free to honor and reverence France, and to serve our God according to our belief" (57). By reimagining the expulsion in this manner, Voorhies allows his Acadians more agency and control than they historically possessed. In the pre-emptive burning of their property and their collective decision on a site of resettlement, the Acadians, albeit momentarily, become conscious historical actors and not mere victims. Grandmother Borda sharply juxtaposes the heroism and stoicism of the Acadians with the impiety of the British Protestant soldiers, who intentionally separate families during the deportation process and (somewhat inexplicably) engage in malicious desecration of the sanctuaries of Acadian Catholic churches (49). If members of Longfellow's readership in the 1840s would have harbored anti-Catholic and nativist

biases, Grandmother Borda seems to be operating in a reverse direction, directing her animosity towards the "heretical" Anglo-Protestants.

At last the "real" Evangeline herself appears under the name of Emmeline Labiche. Like Longfellow's Evangeline, she is betrothed to a fellow villager – the young Louis Arceneaux. In an apparent attempt to nativize Longfellow's *Evangeline* and reclaim its characters from Anglo-American culture, Voorhies swaps out the faux-Acadian surnames of Longfellow's Evangeline Bellefontaine (Beautiful Fountain) and Gabriel Lajeunesse (Youth) for surnames actually common among his Cajun readership, Labiche and Arceneaux.[28] Orphaned long before the deportation, Emmeline comes under the care of Borda and becomes known in the village as Evangeline due to her ethereal demeanor. The grandmother explains, "we had come to look upon her as not of this earth, but rather as our guardian angel, and this is why we called her no longer Emmeline, but Evangeline, or God's little angel" (83-4). Though a bit loose in terms of its etymology, moving from *euàngelos* (Gk. "bringing good news") to *àngelos* (Gk. "one who announces"), Borda's explanation for the name-change is plausible enough. In light of Voorhies's later claims for the historical existence of this "real" Evangeline, however, such slippery

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[28] Georges Cerbelaud Salagnac in the article "L'*Evangéline* de Longfellow et la réalité historique" boldly makes the claim against the accuracy of Longfellow's characters' surnames. He asserts that Bellefontaine and Lajeunesse are, in fact, Canadian names, and argues for an ethnic difference between Canadians and Acadians: "Au grand jamais, on peut l'affirmer sans la moindre hésitation, aucun Acadien ne s'est appelé Bellefontaine ou Lajeunesse. Pour ne prendre que quelques noms parmi les plus usités, les Acadians s'appelaient, et s'appelent toujours, Le Blanc, Arsenault, Gallant, Cormier, Boudreau, Richard, Doucet, Landry, Poirier, Robichaud, Comeau, Léger, Mélançon, Hébert, Daigle, Thibaudeau, Belliveau, Bourgeois, Gagnon, d'Entremont, Aucoin, etc. En revanche, ces noms de Bellefontaine et Lajeunesse sont canadiens . . . La colonisation de l'Acadie a été uniquement paysanne, et jamais militaire. Les Acadians ne descendent pas de soldats français" (26-27).

Translation, mine: "Never – one can affirm it without the least hesitation – was any Acadian ever called Bellefontaine or Lajeunessee. To take only a few names most often used by the Acadians, they were called (and are still called) Le Blanc, Arsenault, Gallant, Cormier, Boudreau, Richard, Doucet, Landry, Poirier, Robichaud, Comeau, Leger, Melancon, Hebert, Daigle, Thibaudeau, Belliveau, Bourgeois, Gagnon, d'Entremont, Aucoin, etc. On the other hand, the names Bellefontaine and Lajeunesse are Canadian . . . The colonization of Acadie was uniquely a peasant colonization, and never a military one. The Acadians do not descend from French soldiers."

etymology might arouse skepticism. If the villagers perceive Emmeline as a guardian angel or as "God's little angel," would not the French name Angelle suffice? Additionally, precious little archival evidence exists for the use of the female name Evangeline before the appearance of Longfellow's poem and the 1852 publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which boasts its own Little Evangeline.

Like Longfellow's heroine, Emmeline finds herself separated from her beloved during the Acadian expulsion. Unlike the poetic Evangeline, a model of marital fidelity, Emmeline's devotion to Louis Arceneaux goes far beyond the bounds of sentimental feminine virtue. As a character, Emmeline exists in a constant state of active refusal to forget not only Louis but also her homeland and the traumatic experience of the deportation. Though Longfellow's Evangeline might gaze wistfully off into the Louisiana night and think back to Acadie while her fellow exiles fiddle and dance, Emmeline's nostalgia operates at a far more radical level that places her in a psychologically tenuous space where time and space become confused. Borda foreshadows Emmeline's later instability as she remarks that, throughout the Acadians' sojourns from their native land to Maryland to Louisiana,

> Alas! It was of no moment whether she [Emmeline] strolled on the poetical banks of the Teche, or rambled in the picturesque sites of Maryland. She lived in the past, and her soul was absorbed in the mournful regret of the past. (85)

Here Voorhies's novella walks a fine line between acknowledging Emmeline's absorption in her own loss and trauma as tragic and praising it as an admirable, quintessentially Acadian virtue. Given that the first-person narrator and Grandmother Borda spend a great deal of time at the opening of the novella praising the virtues of memory and bemoaning those who forget their pasts, it is difficult not to see the emphasis on Emmeline's inability to forget her past as a laudatory move on the part of the narrator. While tragic, it might serve as the logical conclusion

of Borda's insistent claims that Cajun virtue consists in a constant, living awareness of past times and past spaces.

Voorhies takes another step in claiming Evangeline as a distinctly Louisianan figure. In Longfellow's poem she lies buried "unknown and unnoticed" alongside Gabriel in a Catholic churchyard in Philadelphia (Longfellow 114). Voorhies instead makes Louisiana his heroine's ultimate destination. It is here, not in Pennsylvania, that Emmeline eventually reunites with Louis Arceneaux on the banks of the Bayou Teche near St. Martinville, under the now-famous Evangeline Oak. What we find in Voorhies's novella, however, strays far from the sentimentality of the lovers' reunion we find in Longfellow. Instead, we encounter in the reunion and its aftermath material worthy of a Gothic novel. Louis informs Emmeline that, unlike her, he moved on after their separation and married another woman. As he begs her to forgive him, he implores her, "Tear from your heart the remembrance of the past" (87). Of course this is the one act that runs counter to Emmeline's natural tendency, insisted upon over and over throughout the narrative, never to forget. Without much more ado, Emmeline instantly descends into madness, succumbing to a dissociative episode caused by the realization that Louis has been able to put aside their past together in Acadie. The sudden onset of madness – the immediate dissociation from the self – seems to function in the text much more like a Gothic trope than a realistic description of mental illness. Grandmother Borda recalls how Emmeline returned to her completely unaware of her own identity:

> "Emmeline, Emmeline," she muttered in an undertone, as if to the recall that name, "who is Emmeline?" Then looking in my face with fearful shining eyes that made me shudder, she said in a strange, unnatural voice: "Who are you?" and turned away from me. Her mind was unhinged; this last shock had been too much for her broken heart; she was hopelessly insane. (87-8).

Here again we might return to the earlier assertions made by the narrator and Borda regarding collective memory's crucial role in shaping identity. If Longfellow's Evangeline offered a positive model of fidelity and piety, it is difficult to see which virtues Voorhies's Emmeline embodies. If Voorhies offers her as a Cajun culture-heroine, she seems to teach decidedly unpalatable lessons – that trauma serves as evidence of the emotional validity of an experience, that inability to move on from one's past demonstrates loyalty, that there is strange valor in repeating over and over again traumatic experience. Certainly cultural symbols and foundational cultural narratives need not be wholly triumphant, but the manner in which the Cajun intellectual and business elites seized upon Emmeline as the almost exclusive symbol for a twentieth-century Cajun culture raises troubling questions. If this is the mythos they and Voorhies want to create for the Cajun community, it is a deeply regressive mythos and one that offers no real possibilities for creating new *loci* of shared meanings and affiliations. Unmoored from Acadie and Louis Arceneaux, Emmeline finds herself without spaces in which to anchor her conception of herself and her place within the world. Longfellow's Evangeline channels her sense of loss into her charitable work as a nun; Voorhies's Emmeline wanders the woods of St. Martinville in a state of psychological fragmentation.

Yet while she forgets herself, Emmeline Labiche does not forget Acadie. By the waters of the Bayou Teche, she sings traditional songs from French Canada. To her neighbors, she speaks as if she is perpetually sixteen years old, still living in the village of St. Gabriel and awaiting her marriage to Louis Arceneaux. Her adopted mother Grandmother Borda must listen to her scream and weep on those occasions when she relives, over and over in a traumatic cycle, being torn from Louis on the banks of the Bay of Fundy by British soldiers. After bemoaning the fate of her adopted daughter, Grandmother Borda tells the children of Emmeline's death:

> Sinking at last under the ravages of her mental disease, she expired in my arms without a struggle, and with an angelic smile on her lips.
>
> She now sleeps in the quiet grave, shadowed by the tall oak tree near the little church at the Poste des Attakapas. (90)

This final claim would serve as the impetus for the controversy surrounding the extent to which *Acadian Reminiscences* constituted an actual historical memoir and further controversy over whether or not this site referenced in the text – the churchyard beside St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church in St. Martinville, Louisiana (formerly the Poste des Attakapas) –constituted the final resting place of a woman named Emmeline Labiche, the putative real-life counterpart and inspiration for Longfellow's *Evangeline*.

This controversy is significant in the context of the dissertation insofar as it engages with the hermeneutic model I have proposed for local color literature as a carefully balanced hybrid space where ethnographic, geographic, and historic fact exist in productive tension alongside romantic imagination, mystery, and ineffability. Had Voorhies and Cajun tourism promoters like André Olivier framed the grave as a playful, imaginative homage to a fictional character, there would be little need to interrogate their claims so forcefully. Such a move on their part would leave us open to appreciate the emotional connections readers make to characters in literature and frame Evangeline's grave as a site of literary appreciation rather than historical inaccuracy. Yet, it is the insistence upon the factual accuracy of *Acadian Reminiscences* and the support of this accuracy from the top-down (from Cajun academics and tourism boosters) that gives one pause before a more generous interpretation of this collective misreading. It confuses the fabrications of *menterie* with historical data and in doing so, enters into the territory of the *mensonge* – the falsehood that deceives or obscures facts.

Evangeline's Empty Tomb: Conflicts Over Cajun History and Collective Memory

Felix Voorhies had previously published dramas and short stories in local newspapers before the initial serialization of *Acadian Reminiscences.* There would have been little reason for his local readership to misread the novella as a non-fiction memoir. Though Voorhies and Borda both insist on the veracity of their tale, such narratorial assertions along with claims that a fictional text presents a "true history" have framed fictional narratives since the origins of the novel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with relatively rare cases of individuals confusing novels for histories of real events. Where the real confusion begins regarding the reception of *Acadian Reminiscences* as a work of non-fiction rather than a novella is with Felix Voorhies himself, who responded to critiques of the accuracy of his historical fiction by doubling down on claims that his work was not fiction at all but a written version of an oral history passed down by his own Grandmother Bordat (rendered Borda in the text). As such, it bore the weight of testimony and demanded belief in spite of the numerous textual inaccuracies that scholars would later point out.

As Carl A. Brasseaux notes in *In Search of Evangeline*, Voorhies had been telling a version of his family's Evangeline story since at least five years before its appearance in print. In a conversation with journalist William Henry Perrin, working for the *Courier-Journal* of Louisville, Kentucky, Voorhies had not only sketched out the details of the family history later to become *Acadian Reminiscences* but also pointed directly to the side of the St. Martin de Tours churchyard as the final resting place of Emmeline Labiche (Brasseaux 26-7). Perrin's report would later be picked up by the St. Martinville newspaper, which published it under the title "Evangeline's Story, the Sad Love Romance of Longfellow's 'Tale of Acadia' Retold — Historical Facts Concerning What Has Been Generally Regarded as Poetic Fiction." Even after

the publication of the novel, Voorhies continued to assert the real existence of Emmeline Labiche. In response to a letter from a reader in Ohio, he reasserts that his grandmother "was an Acadian exile, and came over to Louisiana with Emmeline Labiche called Evangeline or God's little angel and whose True Story I have related in my *Acadian Reminiscences*" (qtd. in Brasseaux 23).

Yet, if this story had long been in the family, little evidence exists that it had been made public before its telling by Felix Voorhies. Clear evidence does exist, however, that Voorhies was mistaken in calling the Acadian exile Borda(t) his grandmother. When George Washington Cable, traveling through the state collecting information for his famous census report, had stopped to visit Voorhies's uncle, Governor Alexandre Mouton, he recorded a conversation with Mouton about the governor's grandmother (Voorhies's great-grandmother), a woman named Marguerite Martin Robichaux Bordat. In a series of manuscript notes on his Acadian travels now held at the Tulane University Library, Cable gives us the following account from Mouton:

> Grandmother, Madame Bourdat [*sic*] lived to be 105. Never known by him to be sick. Was a widow with several children when the deportation took place at Grandpre [*sic*]. Heard of the ensnaring of people in the church, fled to the woods where she lived on roots & berries for 10 days. Finally, many of her friends & relatives being deported by the English & the crops laid to waste she had to leave. Came to Louisiana & married a surgeon of the French army. They settled on Carancro. (qtd. in Brasseaux 25).

While the details of Bordat's escape from Grand Pré and her foraging for food in the woods of Nova Scotia make for a remarkable story, these are not included in Voorhies's *Acadian Reminiscences*. Significantly missing from Mouton's account of his grandmother's deportation is her adopted daughter Emmeline Labiche and her struggles with mental illness. Presumably the educated Governor Mouton, familiar with Cable's literary stature, would have jumped at the chance to relate the family's connection to the "true" Evangeline of Longfellow's poem.

Eventually Voorhies did concede, at the prompting of readers, that he had never known his great-grandmother Marguerite Martin Robichaux Bordat and that his depiction of the character of Grandmother Borda in *Acadian Reminiscences* was based on memories from his mother and his uncle the governor. Yet he nevertheless held stubbornly to the accuracy of the narrative and the assertion that he had faithfully rendered all those details passed down to him by those older relatives who had known Bordat personally. Finally the novel attracted the attention of Canadian cultural elites, among them Edmond Montet, the secretary of the Société Historique de Montréal, who wrote a letter to Voorhies in February 1918 disputing the history presented in Voorhies's "true story" and requesting further information from the author to back up certain historical and geographical claims – among them, the location of the village of St. Gabriel, which Montet himself could not find recorded in archival records. Montet asks Voorhies pointedly:

> Est-il vrai qu'Evangeline n'est pus [*sic*] un personnage de fiction, qu'elle s'appelait Emmeline Labiche et que son amant Gabriel Lajeunesse s'appelait Louis Arsenault [sic]?[29] (qtd. in Brasseaux 7)

To this Voorhies finally offered a minor concession: "I have made no pretensions at being a historian, nor at expounding *ex cathedra*" (qtd. in Brasseaux 26). Yet this retreat behind the role of the fiction-writer stands in stark contrast with Voorhies's earlier assertions – to the local community, to Perrin, and to particular readers of the text – that *Acadian Reminiscences* is not only accurate in its historical details but provides a real historical account of a flesh-and-blood woman named Emmeline Labiche, the real Evangeline.

These attacks, these claims and counter-claims, rather than weakening the idea that a real Evangeline once existed, actually strengthened public opinion in Cajun south Louisiana that – if so many prominent writers, scholars, and politicians were concerned with Voorhies's fake

[29] Is it true that Evangeline is not a fictional character, that she was called Emmeline Labiche and that her lover Gabriel Lajeunesse was called Louis Arsenault?

Evangeline – there must be a true Evangeline out there somewhere. Pretenders appeared from all sides, claiming that either oral family histories or independent research (always murky) revealed to them that Longfellow had based his Evangeline on *their* ancestor. Among these, a Harvard graduate named Judge Edouard Simon was listed as a descendant of Evangeline and named as the person who communicated her story to Longfellow by both his obituary in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* and the 1941 WPA-produced *Louisiana: A Guide to the State.* The *Picayune* obituary claims, "It was from the pupil Simon that the poet Longfellow obtained the description and topography of the Teche country to write his poem 'Evangeline'" (qtd. in Brasseaux 28). The guidebook goes one step further, mixing up Simon's claim and Voorhies's: "While writing the poem, Longfellow is known to have maintained a correspondence with Edward Simon, a young lawyer of St. Martinville . . . So it is entirely possible that he knew the story of Emmeline Labiche" (*Louisiana: A Guide to the State* 624). Carl Brasseaux, along with Barry Jean Ancelet, an early founder of Cajun studies in South Louisiana, definitively proved that though Simon had once gone to a Longfellow lecture, it is highly unlikely he ever had a conversation with Longfellow (28). Additionally, both Longfellow and Hawthorne's papers and accounts of their reception of the tale from the Maine clergyman Conolly directly refute such a contention that Simon is the source of the Evangeline story. Nevertheless, misleading sources such as this obituary and guidebook perpetuated the idea not only that Longfellow got his idea for *Evangeline* from Louisiana Cajuns but that Emmeline Labiche was an actual historical personage.

All of this would be rather unremarkable – a rush among locals to claim prestige by associating oneself or one's family with a Cajun culture-heroine – had not academic institutions begun to participate in the perpetuation of the falsehood regarding the existence of Emmeline

Labiche. George P. Bible, the first scholar to use Felix Voorhies's novella as a historical source for his *An Historical Sketch of the Acadians: Their Deportations and Wanderings, Together with a Consideration of the Historical Basis for Longfellow's Poem Evangeline* (1906), cites *The Weekly Iberian* version of Voorhies's text and claims that it "accounts for the grave of the real Evangeline being located in the Teche country of the South" (Bible 7). A number of members of Louisiana's academic communities, making use of this source, put forward faulty claims for the existence of Emmeline Labiche. The names and statuses of these scholars are shocking given the dearth of actual material – beyond Voorhies's own shaky assertions – that exists to prove Labiche's existence. Yet both Harry Lewis Griffin, a history professor at Southwestern Louisiana Institute (later USL and now the University of Louisiana, Lafayette) and the SLI Dean of Agriculture Thomas J. Arceneaux publicly supported Voorhies's claims that his grandmother had adopted the true Evangeline (Brasseaux 30). Professor Griffin in *The Acadian Story* boldly and succinctly argues that Longfellow "based his story on the life of one of the refugees, Emmeline Labiche, who was separated from her lover. Research has proved that Emmeline actually lived" (6). For Thomas J. Arceneaux, one must question what personal investments might have played into his decision to support Voorhies's claims – namely, that if Voorhies's novella is actually non-fictional, then the Dean's own ancestor would be the real Gabriel, Louis Arceneaux. Even as late as 1965, Cecil B. Taylor, the chancellor of LSU, appeared at a dedication of the Evangeline gravesite, granting an aura of academic credibility to the proceedings. The December 9, 1965, issue of the local *Teche News* described the event as a remembrance of the work of Felix Voorhies: "His 'Acadian Reminiscences' is a great guide in learning of the lives of our ancestors as well as an extremely important historical document" (qtd. in Brasseaux 49).

The introductory material included in various editions of *Acadian Reminiscences* did nothing to ameliorate the scholarly confusion. In the Boston edition, Andrew Thorpe's introduction says that what Voorhies had done in recording Borda's testimony "will probably bear favorable comparison with the annals of Joan of Arc, given to the world as the narrative of her secretary" (11). Here it is almost certain that Thorpe refers to Mark Twain's *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1896), but given the publication of T. Douglas Murray's 1903 English translation of the trial records of Jeanne d'Arc (one which gained the admiration of Pope Pius X), Thorpe's ambiguity here might confuse readers unfamiliar with Twain's text. Later in the twentieth century, USL accepted the copyright of *Acadian Reminiscences* as a gift from the Voorhies family and published a new edition in 1977 as part of the American Bicentennial Project. Introductory material included in this edition came from the edition published by E.P. Rivas in New Orleans in 1907, in which Voorhies's own grandson, Felix Birney Voorhies, suggested that "To this day travelers may visit the quaint town of St. Martinville on the banks of Bayou Teche and pay their respects at the grave-shrine of Evangeline" (11). No attempt was made in this bicentennial version to counter or contextualize Voorhies's claims to the veracity of his account or the existence of Emmeline Labiche. Yet what the introductory material does indicate, with its call for national tourists to visit Evangeline's tomb in St. Martinville, is the role that the Cajun tourism industry played in reinforcing Voorhies's misleading assertions. Once interest in the text expanded beyond the borders of the Acadian parishes, its readership became a wider American populace eager to visit the curious gravesite of Longfellow's heroine and to bring with them on this pilgrimage an influx of revenue that would prove a substantial boost to the economy of St. Martinville.

In the decades that followed the publication of Voorhies's novel, a veritable Evangeline mania swept through south Louisiana. Mardi Gras parades with Evangeline themes began to roll through the streets during Carnival season. Businesses renamed themselves Evangeline Motors, Evangeline Maid Bakery, and even Evangeline Funeral Home. Groups of "Evangeline girls" dressed like French milkmaids (similar to those in Fig. 4.2) made appearances at both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions, as well as at the inauguration of Herbert Hoover (Brundage 297). One set of these Evangeline girls at the DNC handed out abridged copies of Voorhies's novella to interested attendees (Brasseaux 39). In perhaps the most extreme illustration of this Evangeline obsession, the western portion of St. Landry Parish (county) separated from the eastern district to form Evangeline Parish in 1910 (Brasseaux 31). An attempt was made to form the first state park in Louisiana in St. Martinville under the name of the Longfellow-Evangeline Park. This ultimately resulted in the formation of the still-extant Longfellow-Evangeline State Commemorative Area. Though the main house that occupies the property is not an actual example of Cajun housing but of mid-nineteenth century Creole architecture, it was nonetheless referred to as the "Acadian House" and later took on the status of being the house of the "real" Gabriel, the Louis Arceneaux of *Acadian Reminiscences* (Brasseaux 46; 48).

As tourism increased, so did attempts in St. Martinville to lure travelers away from the larger cities of Lafayette and New Orleans. Anxious that visitors would bypass the relatively humble Cajun town, locals (sometime between 1895 and 1902, the timing is unclear) named an oak tree near the Bayou Teche the Evangeline Oak and later erected a bust of Longfellow nearby. Not to be outdone, other small Cajun towns such as Morgan City began declaring groves of their oak trees "Evangeline groves" in what quickly turned into an arboreal arms-race. At one

point vandals poisoned and killed the St. Martinville Evangeline Oak, and the town resigned itself to declaring yet another oak tree the "real" Evangeline Oak (Brasseaux 32).[30] By 1925, the St. Martinville poet and Evangeline enthusiast André Olivier had opened the Evangeline Museum, a cross between a souvenir shop and a shrine to the Acadian maiden (Brasseaux 35).

The enigmatic figure of Olivier features prominently in the development of the Emmeline Labiche tomb as an actual memorial and not merely a vague place mentioned as being located alongside St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church. It was this Olivier who, when a Hollywood crew arrived in St. Martinville in 1929 to film the silent motion picture *Evangeline*, announced at a cast supper that (per Voorhies's text) the body of the real Evangeline lay buried in the nearby churchyard. Dolores del Rio, the actress who portrayed Evangeline in the film, immediately offered money to pay for the construction of an actual white-washed tomb over the site of the grave and offered as well a statue, modeled in the likeness of del Rio herself, to be placed atop the tomb. The final unveiling of the memorial took place in April 1931, and yet again the political and academic institutions of Louisiana appeared to grant validity to the claim that the real body of Emmeline Labiche lay, if not in the tomb itself, somewhere in the general vicinity underneath the above-ground sepulchre. André Olivier would claim – incorrectly – that a more recent wing of St. Martin de Tours had been built over the actual site of the body. Numbered among the attendees at the commemoration of the tomb was the charismatic populist Governor Huey P. Long, who, though not a Cajun himself, was nevertheless a man not known to shy away from spectacle (Brasseaux 41).

[30] Such malicious arboricide of live oaks in the American South is not a rare occurrence. The reasons behind the killing of these centuries-old trees include personal vendettas and occasionally – as was the case when Alabama fan Harvey Updike, Jr. poisoned two of the famous oaks at Toomer's Corners in Auburn during the 2010 football season – animus based on SEC sports rivalries.

The statue remains atop the tomb to the present day (Fig 4.1). The bronze figure of Evangeline looks off into the distance, conceivably waiting for Gabriel. Upon the base of the tomb, the marble plaque pairs the names of Evangeline and Emmeline Labiche and claims to be a memorial to those Acadians exiled in 1765 – a historical complication given that, if we are to take this for Evangeline's grave, the correct date for the Grand Pré expulsion is ten years earlier, 1755. Smaller tombs of previous pastors of the church abut the side of the building itself, along with a memorial grave dedicated to the souls of unborn infants that bears the famous passage from the prophet Jeremiah regarding the weeping of Rachel in Ramah for her lost children. Fragments of French tombstones from the old cemetery rest in the garden around Evangeline's tomb. Despite the claims over the decades by tourist brochures, political and cultural organizations, and even members of the Cajun academic community, no body of a female Acadian exile rests in the Evangeline tomb or underneath it or around it. There is no body of Emmeline Labiche here because she is, like Evangeline herself, a fictional character.

So what does it mean to say that the locals who read *Acadian Reminiscences* as a non-fictional text (and thus believe that an actual body lies in Evangeline's tomb) misinterpret or misread the text? A scholar should think carefully before entering into discussion of the foundational narratives that define a culture. One might rightly hesitate as well in considering the consequences of a scholar asserting such authority. It seems a massive expansion of a hermeneutics of suspicion, one that would stretch to encompass readers as well as the text under consideration. Rita Felski argues in *The Limits of Critique* that twenty-first century academic study in the humanities is caught in the "relentless grip" of "an antinormative normativity: skepticism as dogma" (9). In light of Felski's compelling claims that literary critics should engage more often in "yea-saying" and appreciating interpretive possibilities, it is with hesitance

that I do make the claim that in the case of certain receptions of Voorhies's text we have clear instances of misreading. Surely the matter does not merely come down to whether or not non-fiction can incorporate elements that are not entirely factually accurate. We have seen the controversy that surrounded the revelation that James Frey's memoir *A Million Little Pieces* included fictionalized elements and know that it would be naïve to approach a non-fiction text as always empirically truthful in its content. Nonetheless, non-fiction (eg. the history book) and fiction (eg. the novel), while they both put forward their particular content using the tools of narrative, make substantially different claims upon the reader in terms of verifiability.

When I presented this dissertation project to an interdisciplinary audience, one respondent objected forcefully to any assertion that an interpretation of a text – especially one connected to the self-definition of an ethnic group – could be *wrong*. As a scholar of religious studies, she held that it would not behoove one to claim, for instance, that the legends of Asian antiquity (which incorporate actual historical events and figures) were factually inaccurate. This is a fine point, yet certainly a text that asserts its status as scriptural or religious in some form makes fundamentally different truth claims upon the reader than even the non-fiction text. Scripture functions as revelation and in doing so claims not only to tell us metaphysical truths but to witness to these truths' divine manifestations. Voorhies's *Acadian Reminiscences*, however, though it may aspire to creating a cultural narrative, asserts its truth as the truth of the post-Enlightenment history book. It is under that framework that I critique it. Thus, while it might be imprudent or smack of scholarly hubris to deconstruct the truth claims of Buddhist legends, no one would hesitate to claim that *Peter Pan* is a work of fiction and that anyone who claims that one can "imaginatively" read it as a historical account of a little boy who never grew

up and who could fly around the room is categorically and unequivocally wrong. What is crucial here are the stakes of the truth claim being put forward by a text.

The name Labiche does not appear on the lists of Acadians deported from Nova Scotia. According to *Ensemble Encore*, an online project funded in part by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities that has compiled lists of Acadian family names based on a variety of lists (including the lists of deportees made by John Winslow, the British officer tasked with overseeing the expulsion), Landrys and LeBlancs abounded in Acadie but no Labiches. Nor does the name Emmeline Labiche appear in the burial records for St. Martin de Tours, burial records that cover the period of time when she conceivably would have passed away (Brasseaux 31). Moreover, Grandmother Borda herself – in reality Marguerite Martin Robichaux Bordat – could not have brought an adopted child through Maryland as *Acadian Reminiscences* claims because archival records indicate that rather than deporting her to the eastern seaboard, British authorities detained her in Halifax until 1764. They then shipped her to St. Domingue (present-day Haiti), from whence she eventually made her way across the Gulf of Mexico to Louisiana ("Prisoners at Halifax" 15; Brasseaux 20). This alone gives the lie to Voorhies's claims for the historical existence of Emmeline, yet members of the St. Martinville community clung stubbornly to the reading of *Acadian Reminiscences* as a work of history and not historical fiction.

All of this would be less pressing from a cultural standpoint and perhaps even partially justifiable on the grounds of ethnic self-definition and communal myth-making if Voorhies's Emmeline Labiche was not such a deeply flawed reimagining of Longfellow's Evangeline. If the Cajuns are to take Voorhies's Evangeline as their primary cultural icon, her virtues seem to fall far short of those of Longfellow's Acadian maiden. Emmeline Labiche's encounter with Louis Arceneaux leaves her psychotic, deeply traumatized, and unable to escape from her memories of

the past. Even on a literal level, she cannot imagine that she has ever left Acadie. In this refusal to offer an imaginative model for dealing with new circumstances, she parallels the narrator Grandmother Borda's inability to conceptualize a complex integration of Cajun cultural life with modernity. The logic of Voorhies's text, the logic which ends the narrative with the Cajun grandchildren's submission to their grandmother's ethno-isolationism, is an unnerving cultural myth to put forward for twentieth-century Cajuns. If this is the Evangeline that the Cajun cultural promoters of the early-twentieth century chose, they chose questionably. Though rightfully looking backwards to the origins of their ethnic group in historical trauma, they failed to look to the realities facing the contemporary Cajun community and to promote cultural heroines and heroes who could offer more than the psychological stasis of Emmeline Labiche.[31]

The stubbornness of the St. Martinville community to let go of their appointed Evangeline led to an international incident in the 1930s when the Acadian Association of Canada demanded that the city of St. Martinville return the bones, ashes, and whatever else remained of Emmeline Labiche to her native land – the former Acadie. Two *Lafayette Tribune* articles from 1930 – "Evangeline's Remains May Be Brought Back to Final Resting Place in Canada" and "Movement to Bring Back Evangeline's Remains to Nova Scotia is Opposed" – recounted the conflict (Brasseaux 62). Two American organizations, the American Forestry Service and the U.S. Historical Association, backed the Canadians' claim for the body. Prominent businessmen in St. Martinville responded furiously that St. Martinville should remain the caretaker of the corpse, claiming that Evangeline should rest where she died – though none of the parties involved seemed to indicate whether they were asserting the reality of the character from

[31] Joseph "Beausoleil" Broussard comes to mind as an Acadian historical figure who could provide a more compelling cultural icon than the fictional Emmeline Labiche / Evangeline. A militia leader who engaged in cross-cultural alliance with the indigenous Mikmaq of Canada to fight the British, he later led a group of dispersed Acadians from Saint-Domingue to Louisiana. Though honored in Cajun culture, there has hardly been an equivalent "Beausoleil" craze to rival that of Emmeline Labiche.

Longfellow's poem or Voorhies's fiction. The conflict ended in a stalemate for – as Brasseaux pithily sums up in his study of the Evangeline mythos of south Louisiana – "No one dared suggest that there could be no ashes as there had been no Evangeline" (45).

Throughout the conflict over Emmeline Labiche's non-existent body, moments appear when the actors involved seem to indicate they understand the falsity of their claims. Though André Olivier had been one of the most vocal supporters of the reality of Emmeline Labiche, an interview that Carolyn Ramsey mentions in her 1957 *Cajuns on the Bayous* catches Olivier (between sips of wine) wryly confessing that "The truth, Mam'selle, is only this . . . that my land and my people are a myth. You may search for them forever and always you will find this true . . . They are only an illusion, a myth of their own making . . . n'est-ce pas?" (296). Ramsey adds her own aside, remarking that she has at last found "the true Cajun," a canny humbug who mixes fiction and history with the wiliness of Brer Fox. Yet Ramsey's move displaces the notion of truth rather than shelving it entirely. Here the "true Cajun" reveals himself in his apparently culturally-specific capacity for *menterie.*

Carl A. Brasseaux, the academic whose work laid the foundation for contemporary Cajun studies and who claimed to attempt to "pierce the veil of subjectivity" as a Cajun writing about Cajuns, spent a great deal of time crusading against the falsity of Voorhies's text only to find that those who wanted to believe in the reality of the fictional Emmeline the most were those very Cajuns who should have been most able to perceive its mythical status – those who were white collar, moving to the suburbs, college-educated. W. Fitzhugh Brundage would later describe this phenomenon as the attempt by well-to-do white Southerners to assert a non-American, non-white identity, a kind of trendy ethnicity to be cast on or off at will (Brundage 272). Exhausted by this, Brasseaux turns at the end of his monograph on Evangeline to the Cajun working class and

attempts to explore how they view the legend. Here he finds the same canniness and irreverence that Ramsey found in Olivier. He notes the apathy among blue-collar Cajuns about Evangeline as a culture-heroine and even records the lyrics of a song one Cajun musician composed about the legend:

Gabriel, c'etait mon parrain
Evangeline, c'etait ma marraine
Gabriel, il etait pas beau
Evangeline ne se valait pas mieux.[32] (52)

With a droll iconoclasm, the lyrics break down the romanticism of both Longfellow's and Voorhies's tales. Rather than young lovers, we find ugly godparents mocked by their godchild. Yet though Brasseaux leans a bit too heavily upon locating wisdom among the Cajun *volk*, a skepticism towards the sentimentality of the Evangeline legend among Cajuns extends to other members of the community such as the former Louisiana poet laureate Darryl Bourque, whose 2012 poem "Evangeline Speaks" depicts an imagined Evangeline explaining how her history has been molded by the hermeneutical preoccupations of the present. Evangeline as the poetic speaker begins: "That girl you think you see beneath the oak beside the Teche, she is other / than the girl I was" (62). She confesses that, as a fictional character, she never had to deal with frontier skirmishes, with foraging for food, with nursing a child. She "was always covered / by right image & right sound, measured neatly in what others wanted to believe" (62). Even in this very recent literary treatment of Evangeline, we find Bourque returning to the same questions raised by accounts by Raynal, Haliburton, Longfellow, and Voorhies of the Acadian diaspora – questions about the borders between fact and romance and between those fabrications that delight (*menterie*) and those that obscure more than they illuminate (*mensonges*).

[32] "Parrain" and "marraine" (used to this day even in many south Louisiana households that no longer speak Cajun French) are the Cajun words for godfather and godmother. My translation of the lyrics quoted by Brasseaux are as follows: "Gabriel, he was my parrain. / Evangeline, she was my marraine. / Gabriel, he wasn't handsome. / Evangeline wasn't looking any better."

Closing Reflections: Hermeneutic Possibilities

If we follow the traditional scholarly narrative and accept that the years before the First World War represent the tail-end of the local color movement, we might consider *Acadian Reminiscences* a late, flawed example of that mode insofar as it fails to smoothly incorporate competing epistemologies in ways that Chopin, Cable, Hearn, and Dunbar-Nelson did. It does not partake in the delights of both/and. Rather, its narrative emphasizes the local as a space of unproductive stasis, and its reception (along with its own author's commentary about the novella) resulted in an interpretive conflict that failed to distinguish between differing forms of truth claims. We have seen throughout this project that local color as a genre straddles the line between an epistemological framework related to romantic truth and one grounded in the verifiable truths of empiricism. Unlike the readings of works by Cable, Gayarré, Hearn, Chopin, and Dunbar-Nelson covered in this dissertation, readings of *Acadian Reminiscences* as an indisputable work of non-fiction fail to allow the two impulses of local color to work in productive tension with one another. Instead, non-fiction and fiction, lived reality and imagined reality, fact and mystery, romance and empiricism become confounded with one another. The text asserts an empirical verifiability and insists that its own romantic elements can, in fact, be verified. It seeks to impose the epistemology not of literary realism (fiction) but literary non-fiction upon the realm of literary romanticism. Unlike Hearn's encounter with the date-palm, however, what we find in the widespread acceptance of Voorhies's claim for the factual reality of his narrative is not a grappling with the disparities between the fictional world and lived reality but a stubborn unwillingness to acknowledge the distinction.

Throughout the critical history of local color, we have seen debates over how best to approach texts from this productive era of American literary regionalism. I have attempted in this

dissertation to put forward a model of considering local color as a mode that fruitfully holds competing epistemological systems in balance and that is able to use the limitations of knowledge and interpretation for aesthetic effect. Therefore I do not, in joining the critics of Voorhies, seek to use the very tools of historicism that I have critiqued in earlier chapters to shut down ambiguity. It is Voorhies himself and his promoters who eschewed this kind of ambiguity in claiming the novella had a single definitive interpretation – that of literal truth. It is this refusal to be open to the indeterminacies of the text, this desire to use an unsophisticated kind of historicism to pin the text and Evangeline down definitively, that reduces playfulness and stalls an appreciation for ambiguity and for the in-between space between history and romance, between data and myth, between certainty and mystery.

This dissertation has attempted to demonstrate the importance of attending to the limits of interpretation and discovering what this attention to those textual elements that resist our interpretation can illuminate about local color literature as a mode at the crossroads of literary realism and literary romanticism. We do not often speak of the limits of our work as literary scholars, and perhaps this is prudent in an era that asks us to provide again and again proof of the relevance of our literary study. Yet this project seeks to demonstrate what can come from engaging with that which makes literature *art* – its indeterminacy, its playfulness, its ability, even as we encounter its impenetrable passages, to spur us to deeper contemplation of the mysterious borders of what we do not know. As the eighteenth-century hermeneuticist Chladenius noted in his *Introduction to the Correct Interpretation of Reasonable Discourses and Writings* (§164), even those passages of texts which resist interpretation open us up to more sustained thought and, in doing so, bear paradoxical fruit.

CODA – [LIMITS]
Beyond the Bayou: Love and the *Locus* in Kate Chopin

> She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle, — a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium. Edna vaguely wondered what she meant by "life's delirium." It had crossed her thought like some unsought, extraneous impression.
>
> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899)

This project has analyzed how authors, readers, scholars, and literary characters negotiate the concept of limitations, and it has done so in a manner that consistently approached limits as positively-valenced phenomena connected to epistemological humility and a productive awareness of the scope of one's interpretive abilities. Local color authors, engaging in a romanticist aesthetics, emphasize the *de facto* boundaries of human knowledge. Local color readers come to grips with the limits to which they can interpret the language, dialect, and folk practices embedded in regionalist writing. Literary scholars' awareness of their own methodological limits can aid them in cultivating an epistemological humility. Even – as Donna Campbell points out in *Resisting Regionalism* – the characters of local color literature themselves find "strength in, indeed through, limitation" (22) and exert a self-actualizing power via "the quiet rebellion of control" (24). The *locus* provides not only a specific space within which systems of shared meanings circulate but also a specific space wherein one can keep abstraction at bay through engagement with concrete, hyper-specific realities. Within her carefully-ordered cottage, Louisa Ellis of Mary Wilkin's Freeman's local color story "A New England Nun" accesses personal pleasure and aesthetic fulfillment not through expansion outward but through the reduction of elements to their most fundamental internal properties. Hers is a delight that comes from smallness, as she crafts her distillations of "the sweet aromatic essences from roses and peppermint and spearmint" (217-8). Yet to leave matters here would account for only part of the way limits operate within local color fiction.

Limits can also confine and isolate. The boundaries that make the *locus* a subject of discourse as a discrete space can also serve as the boundaries for imposing oppressive power – the boundaries of the region over which one rules (*regere*). It would be naïve to ignore the capability of limits to cordon one off from other places and persons. Although limits and boundaries offer the New England "nun" Louisa opportunities and possibilities for the growth of an interior life, these same limitations cut her off from relationships with others (i.e. her former fiancé Joe Dagget). Thus limits, viewed from another angle, create the kind of "colorless existence" Edna Pontellier fears in *The Awakening*. In such spaces, limits can not only serve as kinds of formal bounds within which the world can be rendered intelligible but also can demarcate a site of stasis and stagnation, "the region of blind contentment" (Chopin 585). They can even overwhelm and confound the individual in so brutal a fashion that death – as we see in the drowning of Edna Pontellier – results from their inability to be successfully negotiated and renegotiated.

Kate Chopin herself, unlike many of her fellow Louisiana writers, had an ambivalent relationship with local color literature and provincial boundaries. Staking herself out as a literary realist in the model of the French short story writer Guy de Maupassant, she occasionally offered criticism in her personal diary and her public essays of authors she deemed insufficiently cosmopolitan in their outlook. After attending a conference of the Western Association of Writers in 1894 – a conference also attended by Alice Dunbar-Nelson's husband Paul Laurence Dunbar – Chopin remarked snidely in a diary entry (later published as an article in *The Critic*) that the kinds of authors she found there lacked an understanding of a wider world beyond their local boundaries. Here the *locus* becomes a space of intellectual complacency and myopia. Chopin remarks of these writers (among whom she lists Lew Wallace, most well-known for his

novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*) that "There is no doubt in their souls, no unrest: apparently an abiding faith in God as he manifests himself through the sectional church, and an overmastering love of their soil and institutions" (691). Here is neither Cable's engagement with a progressive racial politics through local color, nor Hearn's romantic *agon* with representing sublime natural phenomena (like the hurricane) that resist representation, nor Dunbar-Nelson's appreciation for ambiguity and unresolved narrative tension. Here instead, Chopin finds a regionalism that results not in a clarification of vision but in a narrowing of intellectual and cultural horizons. She urges the members of the Western Association of Writers to remember that "There is a very, very big world lying not wholly in northern Indiana, nor does it lie at the antipodes, either. It is human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripping of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it" (691). Chopin indicates here that the limitations that hobble the work of these regionalist are not strictly geographical – that they do not have to go to "the antipodes" to broaden their vision. Instead, she suggests, their art might benefit from an overcoming of internal limitations as well and a more concerted attempt to encounter other human beings in all their complexity and nuance.

In keeping with Chopin's remarks, I would like to close this dissertation with musings on how the "big world" factors into local color fiction and how love – the *caritas* that draws one outside of the boundaries of selfhood toward other people – functions in relationship to the *locus*. These musings are provisional by nature, and my intention is merely to demonstrate an awareness of the ambivalent nature of limits as structures that can confine and oppress even as they allow for the emergence of order and meaning. Academic discourse in the humanities regarding limits so often views them *primarily* as obstacles, and while this project has sought to provide a counterweight to that tendency by discussing limits as either fruitful or as fundamental

qualities of being in the world, it is not my intention to dismiss the negative capabilities of limits *tout court*. In this coda I wish to offer – without backing down from this project's insistence on the aesthetically- and hermeneutically- productive qualities of limits – a humanistic gesture to those instances when limits become intolerable obstacles to human flourishing. I would like to turn to Kate Chopin's short story "Beyond the Bayou" from her collection *Bayou Folk* (1894), published the same year she attended the gathering of the Western Association of Writers, as a depiction of how the virtue of *caritas* can overcome geographical, psychological, and interpersonal limitations. Chopin's story of the formerly-enslaved woman La Folle and her love for the boy Chéri dramatizes the struggle to move beyond prescribed and self-imposed limits and the related struggle to bridge not only separate geographic spaces but those spaces that exist between persons.

La Folle – born Jacqueline but since deemed to be insane ("The Mad") – lives in relative isolation. Even the cattle whose familiar noises she takes comfort in exist in an environment described in terms of its limits – the bayou provides them not with abundance but "with water enough" (216). The opening paragraph of the short story returns, repeatedly, to the limits that define La Folle's world. Forests behind her cabin lead to "unknown regions" (216). La Folle herself constructs a *locus* that the narrator describes as arbitrary: "the woman had drawn an imaginary line, and past this circle she never stepped" (216). Soon we are given the rational basis (or irrational basis) for this, La Folle's "only mania" – that as a child during the Civil War she saw the son of her master stumble "black with powder and crimson with blood" into her mother's cabin after a skirmish with Union forces in the nearby woods (216). Following that trauma, La Folle refuses to cross the bayou, even as the historical shifts of the postbellum world move her formerly-enslaved neighbors away from her and leave her cabin isolated from the plantation of

Bellissime. Even when the elderly mistress of the plantation dies, La Folle pays her respects by standing and weeping at the very edge of the bayou. Her chief interactions with the world "beyond the bayou" consist of her meetings with the white child Chéri, the ten-year-old son of the current plantation owners.

Certain contemporary readers might balk at this depiction of a positive relationship between a maternal, formerly-enslaved black woman and a white scion of a Creole slaveholding family, pointing out its participation in stereotypes of the devoted mammy. While I wish, of course, to take these stereotypes into account and acknowledge the social and emotional injustices of postbellum race relations, I would like, in this brief analysis, to focus primarily on Chopin's depiction of the real bonds of affection between these two characters. Their relationship is one of exchange and abundance. La Folle cooks Chéri "croquignoles of the most fantastic and alluring shapes," and Chéri arrives at her cabin "pockets all bulged out with almonds and raisins and an orange that he had secured for her from the very fine dinner which had been given that day up at his father's house" (217). La Folle prefers Chéri to the other white children (even the daughters of her former master), and he clearly maintains a special affection for her as well, giving her as a gift curls of his own hair bound by a red ribbon. Fraught though it might be with historical and racial complications, their affection for one another remains an unquestionably powerful element of the short story. It is this affection – and more than affection, love – that gives dramatic force to the narrative arc of "Beyond the Bayou."

One day while hunting, Chéri accidentally shoots himself in the leg when his rifle misfires. La Folle, the first to find him after hearing his cries, carries him out of the forest where once his father had been wounded by the gunfire of warfare and not the gunfire of sport. Already in her act of lifting and carrying the wounded and bloody child, La Folle has demonstrated an

initial move toward transcending her psychological and emotional limits. She carries the child to the edge of the bayou but there hesitates. She cries for help, but when none appears, she realizes she must overcome her terror of leaving her carefully demarcated *locus* in order not only to save the child she loves but to re-engage with the wider community of support across the bayou. Chopin does not over-sentimentalize La Folle's bayou-crossing. Instead, La Folle's visceral reactions to inner psychological turmoil are rendered with graphic detail. Even contemplating the decision to cross results in "hot tears . . . scalding her neck" (219). After crying fruitlessly in French, she launches herself across the boundary line of the bayou, praying now to God for assistance in the absence of immediate material aid: "Bon Dieu, ayez pitié La Folle! Bon Dieu, ayez pitié moi!" (219). She rushes through the new cabins of the local black population, who – knowing her history and her resistance to moving beyond the bayou – express shock at her appearance on their bank of the waterway. They back away upon noticing her disturbing physical features: "Her eyes were bloodshot and the saliva had gathered in a white foam on her black lips" (219). She returns the child to his father at Bellissime, then collapses.

She awakens much later, back in her cabin across the bayou. Then, in the "cool gray morning," after taking her black coffee, she makes her second bayou-crossing, "with long, steady stride as if she had done this all her life" (220). The world beyond her immediate *locus* reveals itself to her on the summer morning as strange and marvelous. The "springy turf" feels "delicious beneath her tread" (221). If she and Chéri's relationship has been characterized by his gifts of fruit as symbols of abundance, she finds further abundance on the other side of the bayou. Flowers bloom in profusion: violets, magnolias, jessamine, roses – all covered in the morning dew. Birds "singing their matins" dart about her as we come to the realization that her isolation in the cabin has isolated her not only from the black community near Bellissime and from more

frequent contact with her beloved Chéri but also from the diversity of natural beauty that exists on the other side of the bayou (221). When the mistress of the plantation informs La Folle that Chéri still sleeps, La Folle plants herself resolutely on the veranda and insists she will wait until the child wakes to see him. The narrative closes as La Folle watches "for the first time the sun rise upon the new, the beautiful world beyond the bayou" (222).

Here the struggling beyond one particular geographic limit allows La Folle to experience a personal renewal that affects her perceptions of the wider world as a space of beauty and not of violence and terror. Her accomplishment grants her the grace of enjoying the delights of the morning, but it also achieves much more insofar as it demonstrates her ability to move beyond barriers – geographic, racial, psychological – for the sake of love. For it is *caritas* that moves her beyond her limits; it is the love she bears for Chéri (her dear, her beloved) that propels her "beyond the bayou" to save him despite her own fears and anxieties. For La Folle, it is not a mere fascination with another place but the love of an other person that spurs her to reconceptualize the spatial and conceptual boundary lines that have governed her existence. Though she has achieved much via this renegotiation, there is no sentimental intimation that she has overcome all of her problems. Not all things are solved here on the level of power structures and post-plantation era hierarchy, nor are all historical and racial complications ironed out. Yet La Folle relates to her *locus* – and to the other individuals who occupy that *locus* with her – in a new manner, invigorated by her fortitude and her love.

We find ourselves here not far from this project's overall focus, as stated in the introduction, on the function of local color as an aesthetic space that dramatizes the negotiation (within a demarcated *locus*) of competing epistemologies and modes of being. "Beyond the Bayou" does not depict the ultimate transcendence of all limits or the deterritorialization of the

human person. Even in its conclusion it does not frame La Folle as a fully-liberated subject or extrapolate her from her grounding in a particular *locus*. Rather, Chopin's story, as an example of local color literature, remains deeply invested in how human beings negotiate the radical particularities and specificities of their environments. The crucial point here – as it has been for this project as a whole – is that local color allows this attention to radical specificity to exist alongside an appreciation for romance, for the wonderful and the marvelous (eg. La Folle's encounter with the unfamiliar fields and gardens across the bayou). Limits – even those limits that must be confronted and overcome – can serve as catalysts for the play of imagination and for new possibilities regarding the relation of the human person to place and to others. Through her struggle to renegotiate her limits, La Folle encounters a world that is richer in wonder and mystery, connected to the wonder and mystery of her love for Chéri.

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